



ADMISSIONS REDESIGNS:  
**A Review of Evidence  
and Promising Practices**

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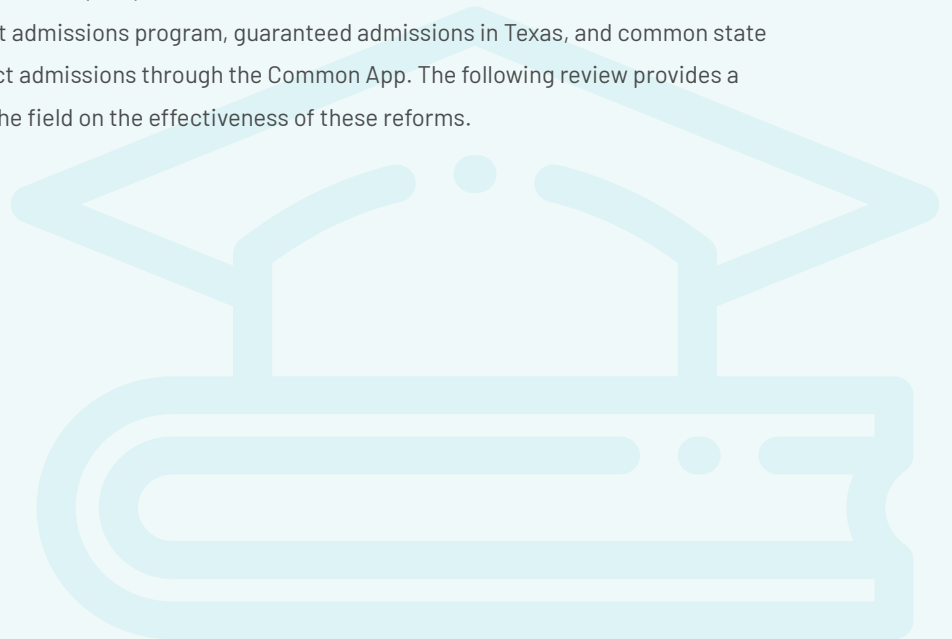
## Introduction

Applying to a college or university in the United States is a complex process that requires students to overcome multiple barriers and requirements, resulting in gaps in college access and success for students with limited social and cultural capital (Hoxby and Turner, 2013). Barriers are especially large for students from low-income families, racially marginalized students, and students who are the first in their family to attend college (Dynarski et al. 2022). Indeed, research has found that high achieving, low-income students are less likely to apply to selective colleges than their more affluent peers (Hoxby and Turner, 2013).

Further, coming enrollment declines across the country have incentivized postsecondary institutions to develop strategies to increase the number of students interested in attending their schools. Shifts in demographics, questions about the value of a postsecondary education, and financial concerns have led to an expected decrease in the number of traditional college-aged students ([White, 2025](#)).

To help address these issues, states and systems across the country, as well as individual postsecondary institutions and organizations such as the Common App, have developed admissions Redesigns to simplify the college application process and increase college application and enrollment. Despite this growing trend, research on the impact of these Redesigns, such as direct and guaranteed admissions, is limited. Nonetheless, there are studies that have helped to identify the level of evidence on the success of these Redesigns, as well as promising practices.

To outline this evidence, Research for Action (RFA) conducted a review of academic literature on admissions Redesigns, in particular Idaho's direct admissions program, guaranteed admissions in Texas, and common state application platforms, including direct admissions through the Common App. The following review provides a summary of the literature to inform the field on the effectiveness of these reforms.



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## Evidence on Promising Admissions Redesigns

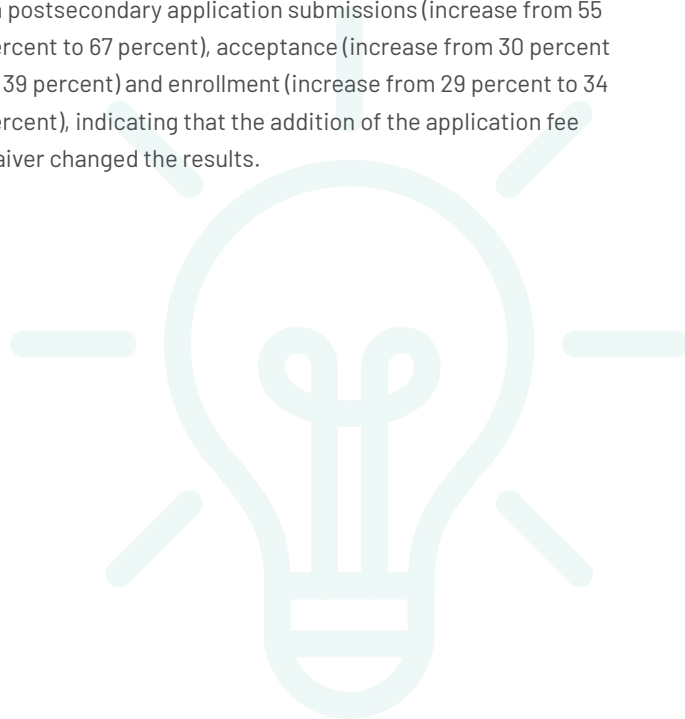
There are a number of barriers to the process of enrolling in a postsecondary institution, including gathering information about potential postsecondary institutions of interest and the college application process, completing the application and related paperwork, paying application fees, applying for financial aid, and enrolling, among others. Studies have explored interventions that address some of these barriers, and findings have varied based on the focus of the intervention.

Simply providing information to students has been found to have limited influence on postsecondary enrollment. Several studies have looked at the impact of providing information to potential college students, but have found that this strategy did not impact enrollment levels, specifically:

- [Gurantz and colleagues \(2020\)](#) found that strategies to reduce barriers in the college application process (e.g., sending students brochures, texts, and e-mails on the college search process) did not impact student behavior. In a randomized controlled trial with low- and middle-income students in the top 50 percent of the PSAT and SAT distributions, no changes in college enrollment patterns were found.
- [Bergman and colleagues \(2019\)](#) similarly sent e-mails and letters on the tax benefits of college to high school seniors, students enrolled in college, and students who had applied to college but were not enrolled and found that none of these strategies affected college enrollment or reenrollment.
- [Hyman \(2019\)](#) mailed letters to students encouraging them to consider college and providing the web address of a college information website but again found no impact on college enrollment among students who were mailed the letter.

However, research shows some promise in the use of application fee waivers and financial aid application assistance, as well as mixed results from the use of common applications. More specifically:

**Supplementing information on college with an application fee waiver has shown more promising outcomes.** Prior to the development of the first direct admissions program in Idaho, [Hoxby and Turner \(2013\)](#) conducted research to determine whether providing high achieving, low-income students with college application guidance, information about the costs of college, and an application fee waiver might result in increases in college application and enrollment trends among these students. The study found a statistically significant impact on postsecondary application submissions (increase from 55 percent to 67 percent), acceptance (increase from 30 percent to 39 percent) and enrollment (increase from 29 percent to 34 percent), indicating that the addition of the application fee waiver changed the results.



**Assistance with financial aid applications has similarly shown promise in impacting college-going behavior.** [Bettinger and colleagues \(2012\)](#) conducted a randomized field experiment in which low-income parents or caregivers were offered assistance to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for themselves or their students, along with aid estimates for nearby postsecondary institutions. High school seniors whose parents received the treatment were 8 percentage points more likely to complete two years of college (increase from 28 percent to 36 percent) during the first three years following the experiment, while those who received only aid information but no assistance with the FAFSA did not experience improved outcomes. Similarly, in a randomized, controlled trial, researchers partnered with the [University of Michigan’s High Achieving Involved Leader \(HAIL\) Scholarship](#) program, which provides an early, unconditional guarantee of free tuition. Personalized mailings were sent to high-achieving, low-income seniors in Michigan’s public high schools. The communications encouraged students to apply to the university and pledged four years of free tuition and fees to those admitted. The offer increased applications (from 26 to 68 percent) and enrollment from (12 to 27 percent) ([Dynarski et al., 2021](#)).

**The Common App has increased application rates but decreased yield.** Common applications at the state level, as well as across multiple states through the Common App, have provided researchers with opportunities to explore the impact of this admissions Redesign. The well-known Common App (the non-profit membership organization that provides a portal through which students can apply to multiple postsecondary institutions across states in a single process) has allowed students to apply to multiple institutions more easily. Studies by both [Knight and Schiff \(2022\)](#) and [Liu, Ehrenberg, and Mrdjenovic \(2007\)](#) found that the Common App has increased applications by 12 percent and 6 percent, respectively. At the same time, both studies also found a reduction in yield (the percentage of students who accept an offer of admission and choose to enroll at a postsecondary institution), and institutions have responded by admitting more students.

**Similarly, state common applications have not shown positive results in increasing enrollment.** In addition to the Common App, individual states and systems across the country have developed common applications, in both paper and online form, for colleges and universities within their state. [Delaney and Odle \(2025\)](#) conducted the first study on the impact of state common applications but found no positive or negative effects on full-time equivalent enrollment, regardless of the format (paper or online). Generally, research has not found statistically significant effects on enrollment following the adoption of any form of a statewide common application (i.e., paper or online).

Building on these strategies to simplify college application and enrollment processes and incentivize increases in college-going behaviors, states and systems have developed and researchers have studied two types of admissions Redesigns in particular: Direct Admissions in Idaho and through the Common App and Guaranteed Admissions in Texas; research on each will be summarized in the discussion that follows.



## EVIDENCE ON DIRECT ADMISSIONS IN IDAHO

Starting in 2015, the Idaho State Board of Education proactively admitted seniors to colleges and universities. Under the [Idaho Campus Choice](#) program, every Idaho high school graduating senior is ensured acceptance to specific state-funded colleges in Idaho, including both two- and four-year institutions. Students can apply online for free through [Apply Idaho](#), an online application portal. From 2015 to 2016, Idaho state officials reported a 3 percent increase in overall enrollment and almost a 7 percent increase in the number of high school graduates who immediately enrolled in college for an overall increase of almost 8 percent enrollment in four-year institutions and almost a 5 percent increase in two-year institutions. With the introduction of Apply Idaho, applications increased by 88 percent in the fall of 2017 - a cumulative enrollment increase of more than 6 percent and a 3 percent decrease in the number of students attending college out of state. Idaho state officials conducted a survey of students in the first cohort of direct admissions students; 58 percent of respondents said that direct admissions had an impact on their decision to attend college and 55 percent said it had an impact on which college they decided to attend. The initiative also had a larger effect on first generation students than on peers whose parents had attended college ([Odle, 2023](#)).

**Direct admissions in Idaho increased enrollments, primarily at two-year institutions.** In order to conduct more rigorous analyses on the Idaho model, [Delaney and Odle \(2022\)](#) conducted an analysis of these state data and found a statistically significant increase in first-time, degree seeking enrollments of 4-8 percent per campus and an increase of in-state students of 8-15 percent per campus, for an overall increase of 3 percent in the state from the previous year. However, they did not find evidence of a decrease in equity gaps in enrollment based on Pell-eligibility (i.e., low-income students). This may have been, in part, because of the homogeneous population of students in Idaho. However, enrollment gains were concentrated among two-year, open-access institutions, where all students are eligible for admission, compared to four-year institutions, where students needed to meet a higher threshold for admittance based on grade-point average and standardized test scores.

Qualitative evidence on the influence of direct admissions programs on students' college-going decisions shows that direct admissions in Idaho helped students to see themselves as "college material" and simplified the admissions process. Survey and interview respondents noted that:

*The application process can be scary for teens, and rejection is not easy. So it was nice to get a letter of preapproved acceptance for some colleges (Howell, 2018, pp. 68-69).*

*I didn't think any college would accept me, but I was wrong and I knew I wanted to go to college, but I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Once I got the letter my whole mindset changed. I knew I could do it (Howell, 2018, pp. 69).*

## OUTCOMES FROM COMMON APPLICATION REDESIGNS

A common application allows students to use a single application to apply to multiple institutions, reducing the complexity of the application process and making it simpler to apply to multiple colleges. The [Common App](#) developed a **direct admissions** program that offers college admission to qualified students before they complete their application, based on an initial set of data, such as high school GPA. The program is intended to increase applications among first-generation and low- and middle-income students and simplify the application process by waiving admissions essays and fees.

**The Common App Direct Admissions program increased applications overall and especially among racially minoritized students but did not increase enrollment.** Odle and Delaney have conducted two studies in partnership with the Common App to explore the impact of direct admissions.

First, the researchers partnered with three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) during the 2020-21 school year to offer direct admission to Black, Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students to one in-state institution in Maryland, Tennessee, or Virginia. Using GPA information that students provided in their Common App profiles, they developed a list of participating colleges with direct admission policies. A set of students, chosen at random, received direct admissions letters notifying them of their admission via email. Selected students also received an application fee waiver. Students who received a letter were four times more likely to apply to the institution and 30 percent more likely to also apply to another college ([Delaney and Odle, 2022](#); [Odle, 2023](#)).

The following year, Odle and Delaney (2023) conducted a multi-state experiment with the Common App and six universities. Using administrative records from the Common App, paired with National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) records on subsequent postsecondary enrollments, the study investigated the causal impacts of direct admissions on student-level outcomes in applications and enrollment. The participating institutions were a mix of public and private and varied in size and location, each setting individual GPA thresholds for admission. Students in a randomly assigned treatment group received direct admission offers, a college acceptance letter outlining the steps for accepting admission, and simplified application (eliminating written essays and applications fees).

The research found that students in the treatment group were approximately 3 percentage points (or 12%) more likely to submit a college application overall and nearly twice as likely to apply to the institution where they were offered direct admission. The impacts were larger for racially minoritized students by 3-6 percentage points, first-generation students by 4 points, and low-income students by 5 points. The study further found that students were more responsive to direct admissions offers when they were admitted to larger, higher quality institutions, defined by having “larger undergraduate student bodies and higher graduation rates.”

However, the research did not find any impact on students’ subsequent enrollment behaviors. About 86 percent of all students involved in the study enrolled in an institution. Among the directly admitted students who enrolled, there was no statistical difference in whether they enrolled in the partner institution or another institution involved in the study.

**The written essay is often a barrier to students completing college applications.** According to Odle and Magouirk (2023) a quarter of students who start a Common App application to college never finish it. Their study of 1.2 million high school students found that 94 percent of students who provided a valid essay response submitted their application compared with only 43 percent of non-submitters. Findings varied by student ethnicity and career aspirations, parents’ educational attainment, school type, community educational attainment, and household income.



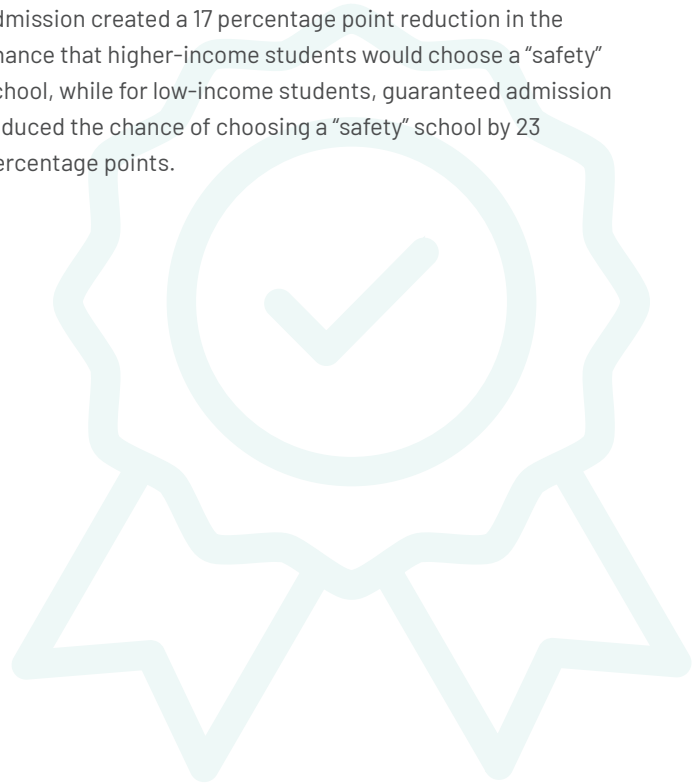
## THE IMPACT OF GUARANTEED ADMISSIONS IN TEXAS

Since 1998, the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan has guaranteed admission to public state schools to graduating seniors in the top ten percent of their class (currently the top six percent at the University of Texas at Austin) and is the most studied plan of its kind. The rule was created, at least in part, to help ensure diversity among students at Texas public universities in the wake of *Hopwood v. Texas*, which banned the inclusion of affirmative action in college application decisions. Many of the studies that look at the impact of the Texas guaranteed admissions policy have focused on whether the effort achieved the level of diversity among students after the affirmative action restrictions were implemented or whether college admissions in Texas reflected the state's changing student demographics ([Niu & Tienda, 2010](#)).

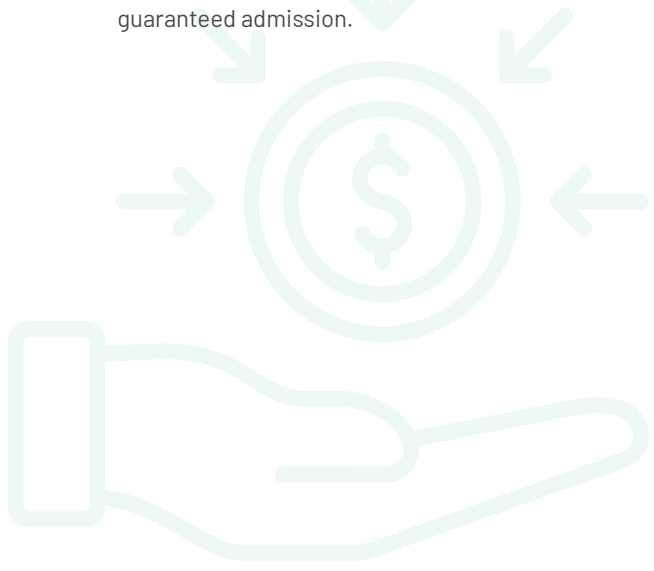
**Evidence on enrollment due to the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan is mixed.** Empirical studies on how the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan has affected enrollment decisions are limited and provide mixed results. While [Niu and Tienda \(2010\)](#) used administrative data on class rank at graduation to measure the impact of the model, they did not find statistically significant effects on flagship enrollment with the exception of Latinx/Hispanic students and students attending "typical" high schools. [Fletcher and Mayer \(2013\)](#) also found evidence of an increase in applications and enrollment resulting from the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan, but their sample was limited, calling their findings into question. [Daugherty and colleagues \(2014\)](#) studied the effects of the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan using administrative data linked to college enrollment records to compare the outcomes of students just above and below the threshold for guaranteed admission. The study found that eligibility for guaranteed admissions under the Texas model increased the likelihood that students enrolled at a Texas flagship university; however, the study only included one large urban district and found the strongest impacts for students who attended high schools with a history of sending large proportions of students to college.

### Guaranteed admissions programs can help to address "undermatching" among low-income, high-achieving students.

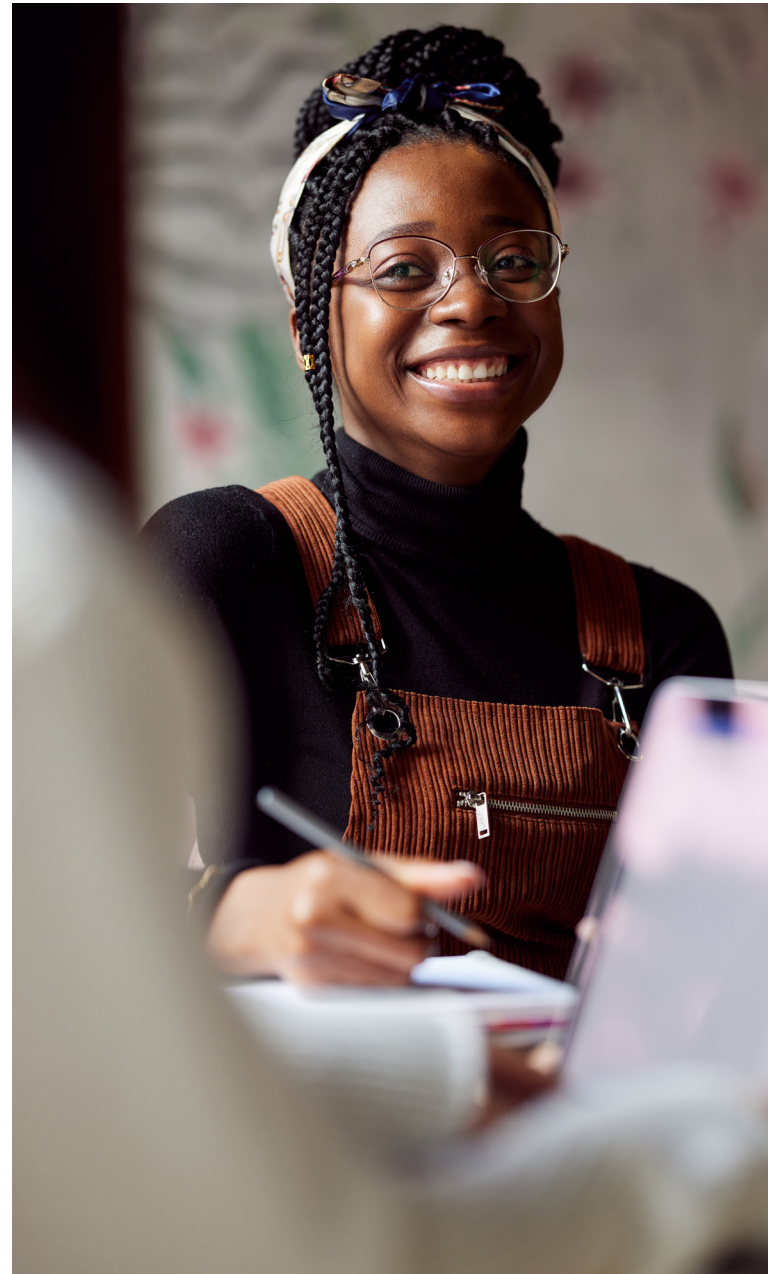
Low-income, high-achieving students have been found to undermatch (select postsecondary institutions below their level of ability) more frequently than their high-income, high-achieving peers, creating a gap in college access ([Hoxby and Turner, 2013](#)). [Cortes and Lincove \(2019\)](#) looked at college application and enrollment among 146,000 students who graduated from public high schools in Texas in 2008 and 2009 and applied to at least one state public university. They identified a group of students with high SAT scores and top-10-percent class rank and sorted them by household income. The study found that the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan encouraged low-income, high-achieving students to apply to and enroll in more academically challenging state universities, but did not find a similar trend among high-income, high-achieving students; more specifically, guaranteed admission boosted the chance that low-income students would apply to a school that matched their talents by 24 percentage points compared to 15 points for wealthier students. At the same time, guaranteed admission created a 17 percentage point reduction in the chance that higher-income students would choose a "safety" school, while for low-income students, guaranteed admission reduced the chance of choosing a "safety" school by 23 percentage points.



**Adding financial support to guaranteed admissions may improve admissions and enrollment outcomes.** [Giani and colleagues \(2025\)](#) evaluated the effectiveness of University of Texas at Austin’s existing guaranteed admissions policy for students in the top six percent of their high school graduating class, in addition to a guarantee of full tuition coverage, on-campus housing, and a housing scholarship through the Texas Advance Commitment (TAC) policy, which provides this financial support for students from families making under \$65,000. The study sample consisted of free-or-reduced-price lunch (FRPL) eligible students in the top ten percent of their graduation class. Through a pilot randomized controlled trial, the research team compared the effectiveness of this treatment with a control in which students received informational packets with a personalized letter encouraging them to apply to the university, without financial aid support. They found that the treatment increased application rates for the full sample, but only increased enrollment at the university among students in the top six percent, nearly doubling enrollment (43% vs. 24%). These results show that guaranteed financial support can increase the likelihood that low-income students will both apply to and enroll in selective colleges, even if they were already guaranteed admission.



Guaranteeing four-year college admissions based on transparent academic standards affected community college students’ enrollment choices and graduation rates. Guaranteed admissions increased high-GPA graduates’ transfer rates to highly selective colleges by 30 percent. Increased transfers to highly selective colleges also accompanied higher graduation rates and lower student debt.



## Promising Practices

While the Texas model has been in place for over two decades, the plan relies on student knowledge of the policy and innate willingness to apply to college. In contrast, other states and systems have developed more proactive admissions Redesigns, such as direct admissions, to improve student application and enrollment rates. While these approaches are relatively new and constantly evolving, the literature has identified some promising practices that states and systems should consider to ensure that admissions Redesigns are effective.

Based on their own review of the literature, [Odlle and Delaney \(2023\)](#) identified strategies that can alter college-going behaviors among students; these strategies include:

- 1.** an **early guarantee** of college admission that reduces uncertainty and risk in the college application process;
- 2.** structural **simplification of the application** itself to reduce the negative impacts of unevenly distributed social and cultural capital, time costs, and the net-present cost of applying to college;
- 3.** **proactive information and nudging** that overcome informational asymmetries at a critical decision point for students; and
- 4.** modest financial support through **application fee waivers**, which further reduce the direct costs associated with applying to college.

Delaney and Odlle further outlined seven key principles for a direct admissions policy in the recent book on college admissions edited by [Poon and Bastedo \(2022\)](#):

- **Proactive communication:** Direct admissions places simple, transparent, and personalized college-going information directly into students' hands without the need for them to opt in.
- **Guaranteed admission:** Direct admissions is a guarantee, a "sure bet" for students that removes uncertainty in the application process.
- **Universal access:** Direct admissions serves everyone, regardless of their race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography, or other contexts. Every student receives at least one postsecondary education option.
- **Simple and transparent steps:** Direct admissions uses clear and comprehensible steps to decide where students are admitted and how to claim their place in college. Then, students can understand how they were admitted and what to do next.
- **Personalized:** Direct admissions centers the students and their college-going journeys. A letter details their performance, their options, and resources designed for them. It does not provide generic information that students must decipher to determine whether or how it applies to them.
- **Low-cost:** Direct admissions is free for students and low-cost for states and institutions. The practice relies on existing data and should require minimal administrative coordination.
- **Involves trusted adults:** Direct admissions recognizes that students rely on others when making college-going decisions and uses this network. Adults in students' networks are also notified of acceptances, informed of next steps, and given available resources.

Additionally, Delaney and Odlle identified the use of a common application and fee waivers as important practices, as well as "complementary practices," specifically the integration of student financial aid information and providing students with information on the majors included at the institutions so they can find a good match for their interests.

While these practices have been shown in the research outlined above to increase application rates, they still fall short of ensuring increases in college enrollment due to the high cost of a postsecondary education in the United States. At the end of the day, admissions Redesigns on their own cannot replace financial aid, the inclusion of which is a critical next step in supporting student access and success.

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