Postsecondary Admissions Innovations at the State and System Level

A Landscape Typology Brief

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Introduction

As the postsecondary landscape has changed, it is critical that the field develop a common language through the creation of a typology that can be used to describe the landscape of admissions innovations and the characteristics of each type as the basis to better understand their impact.

College admission in the United States is an extensive and complex process that has been described as a gauntlet.[i] While the process of college admissions varies for each applicant, students commonly need to identify colleges and universities that meet their needs and capacity, take any required standardized exams (e.g., SAT, ACT), complete complex applications by the established deadlines, pay application fees or request fee waivers, gather any required letters of recommendation, write admissions essays, apply for financial aid, and wait for institutions to notify them as to whether they have been admitted, and then select the institution they wish to attend. At the same time, many postsecondary institutions have been experiencing considerable decreases in enrollment, especially since the pandemic.[ii] Over the past few years, states, postsecondary systems, and policymakers have responded to these issues by developing new programs with the goal of increasing postsecondary access and institutional enrollment by simplifying the admissions process. These programs especially focus on first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color who may not have considered attending college otherwise.

The speed with which these admissions innovations have developed in state and postsecondary systems across the country has made it challenging for the field to document and analyze the scope of these reforms. Further, terms such as "direct," "guaranteed," and "automatic" admissions have been used interchangeably, without a shared set of definitions and characteristics for each.[iii]

It is critical that the field develop a common language that can be used to describe the landscape of admissions innovations and the characteristics of each type to better understand their impact. To that end, we propose a typology of postsecondary admissions innovations, so that policymakers and postsecondary systems administrators can make more informed decisions about the reforms they adopt based on the options already developed in the field.[1] This typology includes admissions innovations designed at the state or system level to inform students about postsecondary opportunities in their home state and simplify the application process to two- or four-year postsecondary institutions.

When discussing efforts to *simplify* admissions processes at the state and system levels,[2] we are referring to strategies that eliminate steps in the application and decision-making process for students, while recognizing that a simpler process for applicants may create more complexity for institutional administrators.

The typology is organized around four key components derived from the work of Taylor Odle and Jennifer Ann Delaney, who identified strategies that can alter college-going behaviors among students; these strategies include:

1. an **early guarantee** of college admission;
2. **structural simplification** of the application;
3. **proactive information and nudging** at a critical decision point for students; and
4. modest financial support through **application fee waivers**.[iv]

While we recognize that there are many institution-level admissions innovations as well, they fall outside the scope of this brief. However, a more extensive report with further analyses of admissions innovations is forthcoming.

[1] All of the landscape data are current as of April 2025.

[2] Admissions processes at the state level refers to polices/programs developed by the legislature or other statewide coordinating or governing body responsible for all of a state's colleges and universities, while system level refers to policies/programs that are specific to just one portion of a state's postsecondary sector, such as a state's community colleges or state universities.

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Admissions Innovations at the State and System Levels

In conducting a literature and landscape scan of postsecondary admissions innovations at the state and postsecondary system levels, we have identified seven types of policies as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

An Admissions Innovation Typology

Innovation Type	Definition	Key Components
Direct Admissions	High school students are proactively notified by a state postsecondary agency or system of their acceptance to at least one two- or four-year institution based on academic criteria (e.g., GPA) and can select the institution(s) of their choice by completing a simplified application process.	• Admission assured early • Application process simplified • Proactive notification • Application fee waived
Informed Admissions	High school students are proactively notified by a state postsecondary agency or system that they will be admitted to at least one two- or four-year institution based on academic criteria (e.g., GPA), but are required to complete a traditional application process.	• Admission assured early • Proactive notification • Application fee waived (in some cases)
Cascading Admissions	High school students applying to a four-year institution in a state postsecondary system who are not accepted are alternatively offered admission and encouraged to attend another institution(s) in the system based on academic criteria and areas of interest.	• Admission assured early • Application fee waived
Invitational Admissions	High school students are proactively notified by a state postsecondary agency or system of their eligibility for admission to a four-year institution based on academic criteria and encouraged to apply without a guarantee of admission.	• Proactive notification
Self-Reported Admissions	High school students enter limited academic information (e.g., GPA) into an online questionnaire/portal to determine acceptance, after which they complete an application to institutions where they are accepted.	• Admission assured early
Guaranteed Admissions	High school students are assured admission to one or more four-year institution(s) if they apply and meet established academic criteria.	• Admission assured early
System Admissions	High school students may apply to multiple institutions in the same postsecondary system with a single application.	• Application simplified or eliminated

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Examples of each of the admissions innovations include, but are not limited to, the following:

Direct Admissions:
Through Idaho Campus Choice, every high school graduating senior is ensured acceptance to a state-funded postsecondary institution (two-year, four-year, or both); students proactively receive a letter notifying them of the institutions that have accepted them. Through Apply Idaho, participating students can then apply online for free to one or more of the Idaho Campus Choice institutions through a streamlined process.[v]

Informed Admissions:
The Direct Admissions Minnesota program notifies graduating seniors of their state postsecondary options by sending a list of the participating state colleges and universities that have proactively admitted them, but students must complete an application for each of the colleges and universities they are interested in attending. Further, participating high schools notify families of their participation in the program and allow them to opt-in.[vi]

Cascading Admissions:
SUNY Match, also known as cascading admissions, connects students who have applied but were not accepted to a SUNY campus with admission at other, alternate SUNY campuses with degree programs in their major or program of study. [vii]

Invitational Admissions:
Through the University of Hawaii Fast Pass initiative, eligible students receive a letter from the University of Hawaii (UH) outlining the Fast Pass program and inviting them to apply to UH Mānoa, without a guarantee of admission. Application fees are waived and application processing is expedited for participants.[3]

Self-Reported Admissions:
The Connecticut Automatic Admissions Program (CAAP) is a portal on the Common App managed by the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System (CSCU). Through CAAP, high school seniors can get admissions offers from ten institutions in the state if they meet the program's GPA requirements.[viii]

Guaranteed Admissions:
Under the Texas Top 10% Rule, a student is eligible for admission to a Texas public college or university as an undergraduate student if the student earned a grade point average in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating class.[ix] The University of Texas at Austin has more competitive requirements due to high demand: UT Austin admits a smaller percentage of top-ranked students (6% for 2025-26, 5% for 2026-27) under a modified version of the rule and can cap its admittees to 75% of each freshman class, with the remaining 25% admitted through a more holistic process.[x]

System Admissions:
This innovation provides a single application portal or form for all institutions in a state system, thereby allowing students to gain access more easily to a postsecondary education in their home state. In some cases, the application fee is also waived. For example, both the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) allow students to apply to all of their campuses with a single application.

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3   UH Hilo and UH West O'ahu also offer conditional letters of acceptance to their campuses based on a lower GPA threshold.

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Components of an Admission Innovation

Admissions innovations vary in many ways; these differences in the innovation components create options for state and system policymakers to weigh, and include:

Scope

The **scope of admissions** innovations vary by

1) the range of school districts or individual high schools included,

2) the types of postsecondary institutions included (i.e., two-year, four-year, both, flagship universities, private institutions), and

3) whether participation in the program is simply up to individual students to determine (i.e., student applies to a postsecondary institution as the first step).

Data

In order to determine whether a potential student is eligible for admission, the innovations that include proactive notification (Direct, Informed, and Invitational Admissions) require **existing student achievement data**, whereas Cascading, Self-Reported, Guaranteed and System Admissions programs do not require this as students are still providing institutions with the data they need though an application process. State and system admissions innovation programs have utilized state longitudinal data systems, developed data sharing agreements, requested their state department of education or individual high schools to identify eligible students, partnered with state financial aid agencies, and worked with individual data vendors to access student data.

Fees

Application fees can present a barrier to accessing a postsecondary education by dissuading students from applying. To address this issue, the **application fee is often waived** as part of the admissions innovation. In states and systems that waive application fees, they are sometimes eliminated for all students, while in other cases students may have their application fee waived if they provide evidence of financial need or during a particular period in the application cycle (e.g., college application week).

Eligibility Criteria

To determine whether a student is eligible for postsecondary admission through one of these innovations, states and systems have to determine what **admissions eligibility criteria** they will use, including what indicators and thresholds will be established, either across the state or system or at the institutional level. Common eligibility indicators include high school GPA, exam scores (i.e., SAT, ACT or state exams), individual courses, and course grades. Further, states and systems can either establish common achievement thresholds or allow the thresholds to vary across institutions.

Opt-in

To address issues of data access, many states and systems with admissions innovations **require students and/or the local high school or district to opt into the program** to participate and share individual student data.

Further, state and system admissions vary as to whether they are required by state, system, or board policy and whether and how they provide information about student financial aid opportunities (e.g., link to FAFSA application and financial aid opportunities).

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Decision Points: Considerations for States and Systems

Based on the typology and analysis, we offer ten decision points and questions to guide states and systems in choosing and implementing admissions innovation policies.

Guiding Questions for States and Systems

1. **Policy Authorization**
Will the innovations require changes in state statute, regulation, or board policy due to the nature of the reform?

2. **Scope of the Program**
Which districts/high schools and postsecondary institutions (i.e., two-year, four-year, flagship institutions, private institutions) will be involved?

3. **Admission Criteria**
Will admissions criteria be common or vary across institutions and what will the criteria and thresholds include?

4. **Student Identification Process**
How will eligible students be identified (e.g., access state or system data, require students to complete an application)?

5. **Notification**
Will students be notified proactively about admission eligibility or will students need to start the application process? If proactive, how will students be notified?

6. **Admission or Eligibility**
Will the program offer admission to students or only notify students of their eligibility for admission?

7. **Application Process**
What will the application process require from students and in what ways, if any, will it be simplified?

8. **Opt-In**
Will students, high schools, districts or postsecondary institutions need to opt-into the program to participate?

9. **Application Waivers**
Will the program waive application fees and, if so, for which students (e.g., all applicants, applicants with financial need, early applicants)?

10. **Financial Aid Information**
Will the program also provide information to students on available financial aid options and, if so, how?

While the typology, related analyses, and guiding questions above provide a picture of the current landscape in admissions innovation, the swiftly changing nature of these reforms may lead researchers to continually revisit and revise this and other typologies over time. As mentioned previously, a more extensive report with further analyses of admissions innovations is forthcoming as part of a larger toolkit with additional resources for policymakers and practitioners as they continue to shape and implement similar policies and practices.

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Acknowledgments

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision higher learning that is easy to navigate, addresses racial injustice, and meets the nation's talent needs through a broad range of credentials. We are working toward a system that prepares people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.

End Notes

i   Odle, T. K. (2023). *Direct admissions: Reimagining college applications to promote equity*. The Campaign for College Opportunity. Retrieved from: https://collegecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/FINAL-EIA-Direct-Admissions-comp.pdf

ii   Welding, Lyss. (February 15, 2024). "U.S. College Enrollment Decline: Facts and Figures." Best Colleges. Retrieved from: https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/college-enrollment-decline/

iii Odle, T. K. (2023). *Direct admissions: Reimagining college applications to promote equity*. The Campaign for College Opportunity. Retrieved from: https://collegecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/FINAL-EIA-Direct-Admissions-comp.pdf

iv Odle, T. K. and Delaney. J. (2023). *Experimental Evidence on "Direct Admissions" from Four States: Impacts on College Application and Enrollment*. (EdWorkingPaper: 23-834). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-834.pdf

v   Next Steps Idaho – What is Apply Idaho? https://nextsteps.idaho.gov/application-guide

vi Minnesota Office of Higher Education. (February 1, 2024) Direct Admissions Report. Retrieved from: https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/Documents/Direct%20Admissions/OHE_Direct%20Admissions%20Report_2024_ADA.pdf; Direct Admissions Frequently Asked Questions for High School Partners: https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/Documents/Direct%20Admissions//Direct%20Admissions%20Frequently%20Asked%20Questions%20for%20High%20School%20Partners_ADA%202023%202024.pdf;

vii SUNY Report on Long-Term Enrollment and Financial Sustainability. (January 2024). Retrieved from: https://www.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/govt-relations/state/SUNY-Report-on-Enrollment-and-Financial-Sustainability_January2024.pdf

viii Common App/CAAP: https://www.ct.edu/admission/autoadmit

ix Explanation of Automatic College Admission and Curriculum Requirements for Financial Aid for High School Students: https://tea.texas.gov/system/files/Explanation%20of%20Automatic%20College%20Admission%20Fig.%2061.1201a1.pdf

x   UT News – Top 10% Law: https://news.utexas.edu/topics-in-the-news/top-10-percent-law/

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