

# Direct Admissions State Strategy

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Washington's economy is on a high-growth trajectory, with a [projected job growth](#) of 12.8 percent from 2023 to 2032. 75 percent of those jobs will require some form of postsecondary credential. Washington's [direct postsecondary enrollment rate](#) as of 2023 was 55 percent, and its [postsecondary attainment rate](#) was 62 percent.

What if the transition from high school to postsecondary were as seamless as from middle to high school? A seamless transition to multiple postsecondary pathways would increase the direct postsecondary enrollment rate. The single most cited barrier to making this transition is the cost of postsecondary education. The second is the complexity of the admissions process. Washington has the unique opportunity to leverage its generous need-based state financial aid, [WA Grant](#), to design a direct admissions strategy to address the biggest barriers: cost and complexity. **Washington will be the first in the nation to do this at scale.**

A national movement that is focused on simplifying, innovating, and automating the admissions process is the direct or guaranteed (used interchangeably throughout the brief) Admissions initiative. Twenty-three states in the country are part of this movement. Washington has also had the Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program ([WAGAP](#)) since 2021 and other smaller initiatives.

[Research](#) shows that a robust direct admissions strategy should include:

- Early guarantee of college admissions.
- Proactive notification and nudging through communications.
- A simplified application process.
- Combining admission with financial aid information or some financial support, like an application fee waiver, at a minimum.

## Direct Admissions

High school students are proactively notified by a state agency or system of their acceptance to at least one two- or four-year institution based on academic criteria. They can select the institution(s) of their choice by filling out a simplified application process.

*Learn about more similar terms in Appendix B.*

Due to the quick proliferation of this policy, there is a lot of variation across states. Some states have created robust data-sharing agreements, combined with single platforms, to apply to multiple in-state universities. Others have tiers of guarantee and waive the application fees for all students in the program. While there is currently very little data on the efficacy of these policies, early impacts of the Idaho Direct Admissions program (the first in the nation) showed a 6.7 percent increase in the direct postsecondary enrollment rate.<sup>1</sup> However, another

randomized control trial done by Common App revealed that while students were more likely to apply, they were not more likely to enroll.<sup>1</sup> ***This is because the cost of college remains a barrier.***


Washington's direct admissions strategy, which if anchored in early commitment of financial aid combined with a guarantee of admissions, can be a real game changer.


This Policy Brief provides a summary of key features to take into consideration, with examples of states where it has been implemented. A deep dive into a strategy for Washington that clearly ties the promise of financial aid with the promise of admissions. And finally, a quick resource on the national typology of the various admissions program designs.

## Key Features


### GOVERNANCE

Governing entities differ from state to state. The choice is driven by existing regulation or new regulation, the ability to access and store data, the capacity to start and sustain the program, the willingness to iteratively innovate, and the ability to build and maintain strong cross-sector partnerships.

 *Illinois* - The Illinois Board of Higher Education leads its [OneClickCollegeAdmit](#)<sup>2</sup> program. They also collaborate with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, Illinois Community College Board, and the Illinois State Board of Education.

 *Minnesota* - The Minnesota Office of Higher Education administers the Direct Admissions Minnesota<sup>3</sup> program.

 *Texas* - The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board administers the My Texas Future<sup>4</sup> program.

 *California* - Run by the California State University (CSU) system in partnership with the California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI).<sup>5</sup>



### Washington State Context

Washington's public four-year universities offer the [WAGAP](#), administered by the Council of Presidents (COP).

A few private colleges in WA also administer their own direct admissions programs, such as Saint Martin's University, Pacific Lutheran University, Whitworth University, University of Puget Sound, and others. Some of them utilize the [Niche](#) platform for this initiative.

## PARTNERSHIP RANGE

Programs range from a single institution partnering with a few school districts to public or private institutional sectors partnering with multiple school districts to state-level programs that partner with community and technical colleges, universities, and school districts. Identifying partners who are committed and developing a shared vision is the approach many states are taking.



*Illinois & Minnesota* – Both Illinois and Minnesota have statewide programs. They have partnered with their community colleges and many four-year universities. They have also included all K-12 school districts in their state.



*Texas & California* – Texas’s direct admissions are focused on four-year universities only. The CSU system started by partnering with one school district. It is now expanding to include a second school district. They have also partnered with community colleges to offer students who don’t qualify for CSU admission to community college with a guarantee of transfer after completion.



### *Washington State Context*

WAGAP is offered by most of the public four-year institutions. Currently, they are partnered with 149 school districts across the state. The program’s partnership with K-12 has been expanding every year.<sup>6</sup>

Direct admissions programs offered by private colleges partner with fewer school districts.

## ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Eligibility criteria typically include high-school GPA. In addition, some states have course requirements in core subjects (like Math, English, and Science) or all subjects. Other states also ask for test scores. Some states have also established different criteria for different tiers of institutions.

Another aspect of the eligibility criteria is the scope of its guarantee. In some cases, satisfying the eligibility criteria leads to the student getting a notification that the university is interested, while in other cases, the student is informed of their acceptance.



*Illinois* - GPA is the only eligibility criteria. From this, students are matched with colleges and universities for direct admission.



*Minnesota* – GPA and course grades in three areas (Math, English, and Science). Based on these two criteria, students are notified of acceptance into one of six tiers of admission.



*Texas* – Class rank, GPA, and test scores are considered.



*California* – GPA and A-G minimum admission requirements are considered. These are 15 course credits in Math, English, Science, Social Studies, World Language, etc.



### *Washington State Context*

For WAGAP, GPA, and Minimum Admissions Standards, specifically College Academic Distribution Requirements (CADRs) are considered. CADRs are 17 credits in various subject areas, including Math, English, Science, Social Studies, World Language, and Arts.

Direct admissions programs at private institutions have varying requirements. Typically, GPA and some consider Math courses as well.

## **DATA ACCESS AND FLOW**

Two sets of data are needed to ensure a successful implementation. First is the student directory information shared across sectors and systems. This is needed to contact and inform students and their parents or guardians about the program, their eligibility, and the next steps should they qualify.

The second set is related to the eligibility criteria. Criteria with many elements will require a more robust infrastructure to move the data across systems systematically and consistently. Additionally, if a state is considering an innovation (another feature explained in detail further below), such as including financial aid information or dual credit information, it will require clear pathways of data flow that merge with other eligibility criteria.





*Illinois* – Students self-report GPA on the [OneClickCollegeAdmit](#) portal. Additionally, Illinois passed the [Public University Direct Admissions Program Act](#) that requires school districts to share student GPA and contact information for those who opt-in to the program. This data is shared with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. Furthermore, student data is also shared with community colleges and public universities for them to communicate directly with the students.



*Minnesota* - High schools have a data-sharing agreement with the Office of Higher Education. Data on student GPA, course grades, and contact information is shared. High schools then notify students and families of the school's participation in the program. Students and families are given a FERPA notice to opt-out. The Office of Higher Education determines the list of students accepted into the direct admissions program, and they are notified by their high schools. Student responses to the notification of "acceptance" are collected at the high school level, and this data is transmitted to the Office of Higher Education. The Office then sends the

data securely to the respective colleges. Finally, colleges contact the student, informing them of the next steps in the process.

 *California* – California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI)'s student-facing platform [CaliforniaColleges.edu](https://www.californiacolleges.edu) collects students' course-taking and performance data. CSU can access student academic records through this college and career planning tool, which is available to all 6th-12th graders, their parents, and educators. CSU piloted a direct admissions program with one large school district. Based on the information on the planning tool, students eligible for the direct admissions program were identified and notified.

 *Texas* – Texas is utilizing its college and career planning tool [My Texas Future](https://mytexasfuture.com) to collect data from students on their GPA, class rank, test scores, and contact information. They are also working to administratively share data sets using the existing statewide data infrastructure at Texas Education Research Center.



### *Washington State Context*

For WAGAP, school districts have a data-sharing agreement with the Council of Presidents (COP). School districts notify students and families of their participation in the WAGAP program and obtain consent to share information with COP. Each school district determines if consent is opt-in or opt-out. School districts then review eligibility criteria, including GPA and course-taking, to determine initial WAGAP eligibility. Student contact information data and eligibility data are then shared with COP. COP contacts students, informing them of the next steps. This data is also securely shared with institutions.

Direct admissions programs at private institutions partner with third-party platforms, such as [Niche](https://niche.com), or have data-sharing agreements with high school partners.

## **INTAKE PROCESS**

Several states have created a single point of entry in the form of a webpage where students who qualify can visit, choose the colleges they are interested in, and complete the next steps in a more streamlined manner.

In other cases, students are notified of the institutions that are interested in them or have accepted them. Students need to visit each institution they are interested in and complete the remaining application process.

Many states have waived the application fee. However, all states still require an application (sometimes a simplified one) that students need to complete after being notified of their direct or guaranteed admission.



*Illinois* - [One Click College Admit](#) is the webpage created for its direct admissions program. In collaboration with Common App, Illinois has created a simple process. Students create a Common App account and profile on One Click College Admit. Then, they self-report their GPA. Based on their GPA, they will receive an email within a week if they have been offered direct admission. This includes community colleges and universities. Personal essays, counselor recommendations, and teacher evaluations are waived.



*Minnesota* – Students who are notified and interested must apply to each university or college they are interested in. Any additional materials requested by the institution must be provided by the student. Students must also complete the FAFSA or MN DREAM ACT for financial aid consideration.



*California* – Eligible students apply through [Cal State Apply](#) to each institution they are interested in. The application fee is waived for one application. Students don't need to submit any essays, recommendation letters, or portfolio materials. Students are encouraged to apply for financial aid.



*Texas* – Directly admitted students are directed to the [Apply Texas](#) page. This page allows students to apply to multiple institutions through a single portal.




### *Washington State Context*


For WAGAP, eligible students must apply to the institutions of their interest through the Common App portal. Institutions conduct a holistic review and may ask for additional materials before final acceptance and enrollment. Institutions work directly with students in any unusual circumstances. Students are provided information on financial aid applications and encouraged to apply.


Direct admissions programs at private institutions also require eligible students to complete an application.


## OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS

A critical consideration for any direct admissions program is a coordinated and consistent communications strategy. Many states are creating a consistent brand, using relevant and simple language, and translating content into multiple languages. This is done in close partnership with institutional, K-12 partners, and community-based organizations statewide. Identifying trusted messengers, from school counselors and advisors to community leaders, is also a strong consideration for many states.

 *Illinois* – Established a school superintendent advisory group to guide student and family communications. This group conducts outreach and awareness campaigns with high school students. They are also coordinating communications materials to match the release of direct admissions in September 2026.

 *Minnesota* – Developed numerous web-based, print, and social media assets related to the program and translated them into various languages. Minnesota is building brand awareness through behavioral “nudging,” specific resources for earlier grades, information on how to pay for college, and advisory meetings for seniors. They are also making communications more robust on the college side, so students can fully leverage this program.

 *California* – California included communications on the value of a college degree and (California State University) CSU affordability in English and Spanish to students and families. They also held Discover CSU days and family events as part of the initiative.

 *Texas* – Launched the “My Texas Future Back to School” campaign through the [Texas On Course](#) network of over 18,000 educators. Additionally, they launched a multi-audience, multi-platform campaign (including social media platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and X) to build awareness of direct admissions on My Texas Future.



### *Washington State Context*


WAGAP is the brand created by the participating public four-year universities. WAGAP is a messaging and communications initiative focused on increasing awareness and access to universities. It has a [webpage](#) and a [Family Engagement Toolkit](#). It is also active on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. COP built this in close partnership with school districts.


Direct admissions programs at private institutions conduct outreach to partner school districts.


## INNOVATIONS

States and systems are linking admissions with other important areas like financial aid, transfer, and dual enrollment.

[Research](#) has shown the power of guaranteed tuition commitments. Key findings include a boost in enrollment when combined with direct admissions. Some states are ‘dually enrolling’ students, wherein students not eligible for university admission after graduating high school are enrolled in community college and are guaranteed admission into university after completion of their degree at community college. There are also efforts to create a common transfer application that auto-generates information from existing data, reducing the administrative burden on students. Similarly, in the space of dual enrollment, college admission standards are revised to include a certain number of dual credits and GPA, which then gets students qualified for the direct admissions program.

 *Illinois* – Illinois’ innovation is to provide direct admissions to *all* high school students and seamless transfer for community college students. Through their [One Click College Admit](#) program, every high school student is directly admitted to at least one community college, and many are directly admitted to multiple institutions. The platform is also streamlining transfer from a community college to a four-year institution.

 *Minnesota* – Emphasis on financial aid application completion and secure data sharing, as they have many tiers of direct admissions. In the February 2025 Direct Admissions Report noted that 76 percent of students attending a direct admissions high school filed a FAFSA, compared to a 50 percent filing rate for all graduating seniors in the state. Also, 46 percent of students in participating high schools enrolled in a Minnesota college after graduation, compared with 28 percent of non-participating 12th grade students.

 *California* – Leveraged their college and career planning tool, [CaliforniaColleges.edu](#), for a simplified and efficient data transfer. They also offer dual admissions – current 12th-grade students who are not eligible for direct admissions to a CSU college are directed to the Transfer Success Pathway. This pathway ensures admission to a CSU institution following the completion of required coursework at a community college.

## Opportunity for Washington State



*WA needs a unified state strategy for direct admissions. We currently have several initiatives that are clearly structured to remove barriers to enrollment. However, they are disparate and not accessible to all students in Washington. Crucially, we are not leveraging the generous WA Grant to create a seamless enrollment pathway. We can message to students in advance the availability of financial aid and even free tuition at our public colleges and universities for some of our lowest-income students.*

Integrating financial aid and admissions to create a direct admissions pathway for all high school students:

- a. Leverage the high school and beyond plan universal tool, SchoolLinks, to message middle and high school students about the postsecondary pathways available to them. Include information on financial aid and direct admissions to 2- and 4-year colleges and provide access to a potentially simplified application form. Explore the possibility of seamless data sharing on financial aid and admissions across stakeholders.
  - i. Financial aid-related information - For those whose families are on public benefits like SNAP, clearly message the tuition-free guarantee at our public colleges and universities starting in 10th grade. For everyone else, provide greater transparency of available financial aid by communicating examples of award amounts with median family incomes. Leverage the Governor's FAFSA initiative to increase financial aid awareness, including WASFA as an option to access the generous WA Grant.
  - ii. Admissions-related information – Communicate open access of our 2-year community and technical colleges to all students. For those who qualify for guaranteed admissions at our public or private not-for-profit institutions, communicate that to students. Connect students to relevant admissions portals (CTC link or CommonApp, etc.).
  - iii. Combine the guarantee of financial aid and admissions whenever a student is eligible for both.

In the next brief, this conceptual framework will be developed to take advantage of existing policies and tools to bring a student-friendly blueprint for consideration.

## Appendix A – Policy Considerations

As the state considers building the infrastructure for a statewide direct admissions strategy, there are other policy considerations pertaining to each of the features described above.







Feature	Questions to consider for WA
Governance	<p>Which governing entity(ies) can sustain and support partnerships as well as data needs?</p> <p>Which entities must collaborate to create an overall program design?</p>
Partnership Range	<p>What is the partnership range to consider for the state strategy?</p>
Eligibility Criteria	<p>What should the eligibility criteria be?</p> <p>What does the eligibility criteria do – notify interest, guarantee a spot?</p>
Student Identification	<p>What’s the process for student identification?</p>
Data Flow	<p>What is the statewide system needed to support the flow of data between K-12 and higher ed?</p> <p>How do we ensure the highest degree of data protection? How do we ensure FERPA compliance?</p> <p>How do we share directory data, transcript data, and financial aid data among systems in an efficient and safe manner?</p>
Intake Process	<p>Does the state wish to have one portal/landing page for students?</p> <p>How can the application be simplified?</p> <p>Can the application fee be waived? What else can be waived?</p>
Outreach and Communications	<p>What’s the communications strategy for the state that emphasizes simplicity and consistency?</p>
Innovation	<p>Who are the entities that need to form a strategy table to further build out the direct admissions pathway for Washington?</p> <p>How do we build on existing policies and programs to create a seamless, integrated, user-friendly program?</p>

## Appendix B

### ADMISSIONS TYPOLOGY

To help break down some of the jargon surrounding direct admissions, the following table from Research for Action’s [Postsecondary Admissions Innovations at the State System Level](#) brief provides helpful definitions for key terminologies that are often used interchangeably in this context. This will be particularly helpful as one may read about strategies in other states and compare them with those in Washington.

Figure 1.  
An Admissions Innovation Typology

Innovation Type	Definition	Key Components
 <b>Direct Admissions</b>	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission assured early</li> <li>• Application process simplified</li> <li>• Proactive notification</li> <li>• Application fee waived</li> </ul>
 <b>Informed Admissions</b>	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission assured early</li> <li>• Proactive notification</li> <li>• Application fee waived (in some cases)</li> </ul>
 <b>Cascading Admissions</b>	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission assured early</li> <li>• Application fee waived</li> </ul>
 <b>Invitational Admissions</b>	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proactive notification</li> </ul>
 <b>Self-Reported Admissions</b>	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission assured early</li> </ul>
 <b>Guaranteed Admissions</b>	High school students are assured admission to one or more four-year institution(s) if they apply and meet established academic criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission assured early</li> </ul>
 <b>System Admissions</b>	High school students may apply to multiple institutions in the same postsecondary system with a single application.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application simplified or eliminated</li> </ul>

## SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> Odle, Taylor Ph.D. (2023). Direct Admissions: *Reimagining College Applications to Promote Equity*. <https://collegecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/FINAL-EIA-Direct-Admissions-comp.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Brambila, Eddie; Schenek, Deana; Sexton, Colleen; Spivak, Victoria (2025). *Direct Admission Illinois: A Collaborative Effort with a Statewide Impact*. <https://www.collegechangeseverything.org/events/2025-media/Direct+Admission+Illinois.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Salasek, Aaron; Robinson, Wendy; Krager-Constantine, Sally. (2025). *Direct Admission Minnesota Annual Report, 2025*. [https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/Documents/Direct%20Admissions/2025/OHE\\_Direct%20Admissions%20Report\\_20250131\\_FINAL\\_ADA.pdf](https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/Documents/Direct%20Admissions/2025/OHE_Direct%20Admissions%20Report_20250131_FINAL_ADA.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> My Texas Future. (2025). *Direct Admissions*. <https://www.mytexasfuture.org/middle-high-school/direct-admissions/>

<sup>5</sup> The California State University. (2025). *The California State University and Riverside County Office of Education Partnership*. <https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/community/Pages/riverside-county-office-of-education-partnership.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> The Council of Presidents. (2025). *Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program Report*. <https://councilofpresidents.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/WAGAP-2025-Report.pdf>