



Policy Brief: Direct Admissions

Taking the Program from Good to Great

The Direct Admissions Minnesota program has made significant strides in fostering a college-going culture among high school students across the state, beginning with the high school senior class of 2022–23. This innovative initiative aims to ensure that every Minnesotan recognizes their potential to gain the skills they need after graduating high school. Direct Admissions eliminates barriers that often deter students from pursuing their college dreams by streamlining the college admission process. Instead of navigating lengthy applications, paying fees, and submitting transcripts and test scores, students can focus on essential questions like “Where should I go to college?” This shift in mindset enhances family discussions about education and aligns K–12 and higher education partners to support students based on their academic performance.

In its inaugural year, Direct Admissions Minnesota engaged 39 high schools and 50 colleges and universities, and this number has expanded to 111 high schools and 55 colleges and universities in the 2023–24 academic year. The Office of Higher Education’s (OHE) 2024 Direct Admissions Annual Report highlights the program’s early successes, showcasing its positive impact on student engagement, particularly among racially and ethnically minoritized students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, while the initial results are promising, the report also identifies opportunities for further development to ensure that the program equitably serves all students across Minnesota.

Building on this success is critical to sustaining momentum and deepening the impact of Direct Admissions Minnesota. To this end, we outline several recommendations to enhance the program’s reach and effectiveness. The following sections will review the evidence presented by OHE and offer empirically-based strategies for ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure that every Minnesotan has a clear and accessible path to college.

Research-Informed Recommendations for Improving Direct Admissions Minnesota

Minnesota is a leader in the direct admissions movement in its program design and rapid implementation and monitoring. The state and OHE should be commended for this work. As the state seeks to scale direct admissions beyond its current set of partners, many important considerations should guide this work:

- 1. Ensure all students can access opportunities through Direct Admissions Minnesota.** Only 111 high schools participated in Direct Admissions Minnesota in 2023–24, leaving students in nearly 700 schools without such benefit. OHE recommends scaling Direct Admissions Minnesota to all high schools voluntarily. However, given existing state investment, promising data from OHE, and studies of direct admissions in other states, Minnesota should consider direct admissions a *statewide* college access strategy. All high schools should participate in Direct Admissions Minnesota. A students' postsecondary journey should not be limited by school/district decisions to participate, which could be heavily driven by administrative constraints (i.e., as noted, many K–12 partners report significant administrative burdens to participate). *OHE should identify which schools elect not to participate in Direct Admissions Minnesota, understand those schools' demographic and socioeconomic profiles, and identify pathways (including necessary resources) to ensure all high schools participate.* It is possible that schools not participating in Direct Admissions are heavily enrolled with students of color, first-generation students, rural students, and students from low-income backgrounds—the very populations Direct Admissions Minnesota is designed to support.
- 2. Focus on equitable participation in Direct Admissions Minnesota.** Preliminary data from OHE report that only about 20% of students receiving information on direct admission actually participate in the program (4,512 of a possible 31,292). These were even lower at some high schools, where as little as 6% or fewer than 10 students participated. Of concern, students who participated were more likely to be white and more likely to be from higher-income backgrounds. Black and Hispanic students were underrepresented among Direct Admissions Minnesota participants (12–13% compared to making up 15% of all Minnesotan seniors), while white students were overrepresented (59% compared to 53% in the population). Likewise, students' eligible for free or reduced-price meals make up 24% of seniors but only 18% of Direct Admissions participants. OHE should study reasons why (a) so few students opted-in to Direct Admissions Minnesota [approximately 20%] and (b) why many students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are not participating. If Direct Admissions Minnesota is not equitably accessed across student populations, it stands to exacerbate long-standing racial inequalities in college access across the state rather than ameliorating them as intended.

3. **Simplify choice and improve student-institution “match.”** Direct Admissions Minnesota has many postsecondary partners. This means students have a wide range of options, including the ability to receive a letter with admission to 55 institutions. All students receive a letter with at least 29 institutions. This decision set can be overwhelming for students and families, and it is virtually impossible for them to fully consider postsecondary pathways to each of these campuses. Rather, students should receive direct admission to a smaller number of two- and four-year institutions that are “right” for them. A diverse body of evidence suggests that students have better postsecondary outcomes when they attend a college that is a good academic and social fit for them. Direct Admissions Minnesota could help facilitate better “matches” of students to in-state campuses by narrowing this choice set to (a) academically-matched campuses [e.g., only showing Tier 6 students institutions in Tiers 5 and 6], (b) geographically proximate campuses [i.e., not offering direct admission to a college over 100 miles away, where the average student is unlikely to enroll], and/or (c) campuses that could facilitate strong education-workforce connections [e.g., students with high Science and Math core GPAs could be directly admitted to STEM-intensive institutions *and* majors]. By shortening the “list” students and

families receive, they can more easily focus time and energy on deciding which is right for them from a choice set that the state knows is likely to be most beneficial. *OHE should identify program rules that could facilitate better student-institution matches by altering which students receive information on which institutions.* Students could still claim direct admission to other campuses, but all 55 need not be listed on their Direct Admissions Minnesota letter.

4. **Identify barriers to enrollment.** Among the 4,512 students who participated in Direct Admissions Minnesota in 2023–24, the vast majority (65%) indicated an interest in attending one or more of the 13 most selective institutions in the state (Tiers 5 and 6), while only 18% indicated an interest in attending one of the state’s 29 open-access colleges. Because prior research suggests that direct admissions is likely to be most impactful for students considering attending a two-year institution or not enrolling at all, it is important to understand why so few were considering two-year institutions. *OHE should work to identify barriers to Direct Admissions participation on the part of students, especially those that would be good fits at the state’s two-year colleges.* While it is promising that most students indicated an interest in one of the state’s most selective four-year universities, it is likely the case that those students were already planning on



enrolling in college, meaning that Direct Admission Minnesota would have had little impact on whether they went to college, thought it could have influenced *where* they enrolled. If Direct Admissions Minnesota is meant to increase the number of total students enrolling in college, focusing on students further down the academic Tiers will be most effective.

5. **Augment Direct Admissions with other high-impact practices, including already-existing state resources.** While direct admissions greatly simplifies the college application process, other barriers to college access and success persist. Students and families broadly lack access to information on college and career options, and, for those who are fully informed and have a college acceptance in-hand, many face a hefty price tag to enroll. Research shows that providing students with targeted college advising and coaching can raise enrollment levels (especially among underrepresented populations)--and additionally providing targeted supports on completing other college-going tasks such as "navigators" to help students complete the FAFSA can also raise subsequent enrollment and attainment rates. Likewise, providing students and families with early information on financial aid availability, including grants like the NorthStar Promise and the Minnesota State Grant, can ensure that students receive a clear message: "You are admitted to college, and we can help

you pay!" OHE should comprehensively identify what complementary supports (new and already-existing) could be paired with Direct Admissions Minnesota to maximize impacts. Direct admissions letters serve as a critical opportunity to signal postsecondary opportunities and supports to students. A variety of high-impact practices could be piloted or scaled within the state that are complementary to the mission of Direct Admissions Minnesota.



Opportunities for Program Transparency and Ongoing Monitoring

North Star Prosperity was eager to read that OHE has partnered with external researchers to undertake a full program evaluation of Direct Admissions Minnesota. Throughout the evaluation and OHE's ongoing reporting, we recommend three practices:

1. **Only report data on students and schools that actually participate in Direct Admissions Minnesota.** OHE reports that 111 high schools participated in Direct Admissions Minnesota in 2023–24. This is a smaller figure than the 142 schools that indicated their intent to participate, of which 22 chose to delay participation until 2024–25 (bringing the total to 120 as of fall 2023). Throughout the fall, another 9 schools decided to delay to 2024–25 (bringing the total to 111). Ultimately, only 98 reported data back to OHE on Direct Admissions Minnesota. However, OHE's 2024 Direct Admissions Annual Report includes student participation numbers, demographic figures, and outcomes for the full group of 120 high schools—not only the 111 who actually participated or the 98 who reported data. *OHE should clarify the participation figures, demographic profiles, and outcomes for high schools in Direct Admissions Minnesota among those who actually participated.* It is critical for the state to understand the true size, scope, and impacts of Direct Admissions in Minnesota; figures should be free of bias from schools who ultimately did not participate in the program, which could overinflate or skew results.
2. Make clear comparisons between Direct Admissions students and similar peers. When considering the outcomes of direct admissions, such as FAFSA filing behaviors, comparing (a) students who choose to participate in the program to (b) students who choose not to participate in the program mostly captures differences between those groups that would have existed without Direct Admissions Minnesota. It is possible that direct admission increased FAFSA filing among students. It is equally likely that students who chose to participate in direct admission were already college-motivated and, thus, were already likely to file the FAFSA. Given that direct admissions participants were more likely to be white, come from higher-income families, and report an interest in selective, four-year institutions, it is perhaps unsurprising that they have higher FAFSA filing rates. To make more transparent comparisons seeking to understand how Direct Admissions Minnesota shapes students' behaviors, OHE should report outcome differences between similar groups. An example would be comparing college enrollment rates for Black students at participating schools to college enrollment rates for Black students at non-participating schools (not between Black students who opted-in and Black students who opted-out). Similarly, a direct admissions student should be defined as any student who receives a direct admissions letter—not just a student who decides to enroll.

3. **Continue a focus on studying actual college-enrollment levels and patterns.** If Direct Admissions Minnesota is intended to increase college-going in the state, the program should be measured against such a benchmark. While monitoring college and high school participation numbers and features, establishment of academic tiers, and considerations for workloads and launch dates, as well as FAFSA filing rates and early enrollment numbers, are important—Direct Admissions Minnesota is meant to increase college enrollments. The current view of student enrollment figures in OHE’s 2024 Direct Admissions Annual Report is limited by the use of State Grant records, which would not appear for all students. As recommended in the report, *OHE should comprehensively follow students’ enrollment, retention, and completion patterns in higher education with National Student Clearinghouse records, which captures over 97% of all public and private, in- and out-of-state college enrollments.*

Making Direct Admissions Minnesota Work for All

North Star Prosperity is eager to work with OHE, state policymakers, and other stakeholders to ensure every Minnesotan sees a clear path to college. Direct Admissions Minnesota has strong potential to change the face of the state’s higher education student body by raising enrollment levels and increasing participation among historically underrepresented groups in college. As the program moves from a pilot to a more established, statewide strategy, the ultimate success of Direct Admissions Minnesota will depend on its ability to fully and equitably engage students across the state and to work as one seamless part of a larger college-and career-success strategy. Program modifications are necessary to ensure this goal can be accomplished—and close, ongoing monitoring is required to ensure Direct Admissions Minnesota is serving the students it was intended to support. The state must be agile in its ongoing development of Direct Admissions Minnesota and look internally and externally to ensure Direct Admissions Minnesota works for all Minnesotans.



Recommendations

1. Universal Direct Admissions

Every high school in Minnesota should be required to implement the Direct Admissions program to ensure equitable access. Schools facing financial hardships should receive an opt-out procedure requiring approval from the Commissioner of Higher Education.

2. Change from Opt-in to Opt-out of Direct Admissions

Implementing Direct Admissions as an opt-out procedure would significantly increase student participation rates. This proactive approach would help ensure that all students, especially Black, Hispanic, and low-income individuals, have equitable access to college opportunities rather than perpetuating existing racial and socioeconomic disparities in higher education access.

3. Simplify Student College Choices

OHE should streamline the list of postsecondary institutions included in Direct Admissions Minnesota letters to simplify college options for students by focusing on a smaller number of academically and geographically appropriate schools. By narrowing the selection to institutions that better match students' profiles and interests, OHE can help families more easily navigate their options and make informed decisions about their educational pathways.

4. Integrate Financial Aid Estimates in Letter

Including financial aid information with the Direct Admissions letter is essential to provide students and families with a comprehensive understanding of the true cost of college, helping to eliminate financial barriers that may deter enrollment. By clearly communicating available financial resources, such as the NorthStar Promise and Minnesota State Grant, the Direct Admissions program can convey a powerful message: "You are admitted to college, and we are here to support you in paying for it!"

5. Streamlining Enrollment

After being accepted through the Direct Admissions program, students should not be required to complete a separate application form for the institution they choose to attend. Instead, a simplified confirmation form should be used, allowing students to indicate their decision to enroll, further streamlining the college-going process and removing unnecessary barriers.