USING DATA TO STREAMLINE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS AND ACCESS

DQC
Data Quality Campaign

Many states and institutions are using data to simplify various aspects of the traditional college application process, such as eligibility, the cost and time required to apply, financial aid, and more. These state- and institution-level efforts to help people go to college (e.g., automatic admissions, guaranteed transfer, and admissions pathways) use data to reduce the administrative burden for postsecondary institutions while simultaneously helping students understand and pursue their postsecondary goals. These programs can also increase postsecondary attainment, serving state and community interests.

All efforts like these to streamline the admissions process will require strong, secure data connections between high schools and postsecondary institutions, ideally supported by a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) that includes data across early education, K–12, postsecondary education, and the workforce over time. Seamless transfer of verified high school data (e.g., transcripts and test scores) to postsecondary institutions or between postsecondary institutions relieves students of the burden of manual data entry and document submission. This process not only reduces application and enrollment barriers for students, especially for students with limited resources or support, but also reduces the burden for institutions, which can instead focus their resources on evaluating applicants rather than collecting redundant information. Comprehensive data sharing can also facilitate targeted outreach and support to students who may not otherwise apply, ultimately promoting greater equity in college access.

DIFFERENT PROGRAMS, ONE GOAL: EASING POSTSECONDARY TRANSITIONS

There are several different models for streamlining postsecondary admissions. Some programs guarantee admission to eligible students whose high school records indicate that they meet specific academic criteria, such as grade point average (GPA) or standardized test scores, often eliminating the need for extensive applications. In some cases, the institution proactively informs students of their acceptance based on the student's high school data, simplifying the process even further. Other universities are offering students a path to admission by directing them to local community colleges and guaranteeing admission to the university if criteria are met there. These initiatives seek to democratize access to higher education by simplifying and demystifying the path to college.

What Does Using Data to Help People Go to College Look Like In Action?

Robust state data systems that support streamlined admissions policies can benefit a variety of interested, affected, or relevant parties in the following ways and more:

Students: Simplifying the process of applying to and getting into college can reduce the uncertainty, cost, and stress associated with the college application process, allowing students to focus on navigating their education and career pathways. Policies like these can also increase access to higher education, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds who may face barriers in traditional application systems.

High school counselors: High school counselors can better support students by making students' options more certain and clear. Streamlined admissions programs can also reduce the burden of assembling the records counselors need to provide personalized guidance to students. In addition, the data connections that enable these efforts have the potential to provide counselors and other education leaders information on student outcomes and college enrollment rates, allowing those counselors and leaders to better assess and improve their support services.

College admissions offices: Using data to identify students who meet admission criteria can significantly reduce the administrative workload for college admissions offices and increase the institution's enrollment numbers, supporting the institution at large.

State workforce: By 2031, 72 percent of jobs will require education beyond high school. Increased postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates lead to a more educated workforce and a stronger state economy. Additionally, when states improve their longitudinal data connections, state policymakers and education leaders can use data to evaluate how well schools are preparing students for postsecondary education, inform public policies around postsecondary attainment and workforce development, and enable a variety of other analyses. These policies can also help close equity gaps in higher education access, promoting social mobility and reducing disparities across different communities.

Employers: Increasing college enrollment rates and ensuring that a greater number of students pursue postsecondary education means that employers will have a larger and more diverse pool of qualified applicants. Data can also help employers identify education and workforce trends at the state and local levels to support decisionmaking.

Legal Compliance, Ethics, and Transparency

Establishing secure, timely, and effective data-sharing processes to make enrolling in postsecondary education and workforce programs simpler for students is critical, but state leaders must design data-sharing processes that put legal compliance, ethics, and transparency at the forefront. The specifics of the data-sharing agreements or the way SLDS data is used depend on the type of program, but many require limited data to be securely shared between high schools and postsecondary institutions or between postsecondary institutions to determine eligibility and facilitate outreach to students.

State and federal privacy laws, notably the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), articulate when and how personally identifiable student data can be shared for legitimate educational purposes. FERPA was codified in 1974 and does not explicitly address the use of student data to facilitate streamlined admissions programs. However, under the law's provisions, states *can and do* share data to implement initiatives to help students enroll in postsecondary programs in ways that are fully legal, safe, and ethical. State agencies and postsecondary institutions have two main options available to them when seeking to use personally identifiable student data:

1. K–12 schools, districts, and/or states can proactively **obtain parental or eligible student consent** to share relevant data with the state's postsecondary institutions or systems.

2. K–12 schools, districts, and/or states can provide **basic directory information** of students who meet the postsecondary institution's admission requirements directly to the postsecondary institution for **outreach purposes**.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE DATA SYSTEMS

State data systems—and particularly SLDSs, which securely connect data from early education, K–12, postsecondary, and the workforce—are critical for the success of streamlined admissions programs. However, building these systems requires states to invest in data infrastructure and capacity and to develop cross-agency governance structures.

For more information about the importance of SLDSs and the Data Quality Campaign's recommendations for states seeking to modernize their systems, see *What Now? A Vision to Transform State Data Systems*.

To learn more about the benefits of using data to help students pursue postsecondary education or workforce training, the challenges of implementing these initiatives, and how state agencies and institutions of higher education can navigate FERPA compliance when implementing them, see *Data Sharing to Help Students Succeed After High School*.

Innovations in the Field

Northern Arizona University (NAU) is creating clear and supported pathways to higher education by guaranteeing every applicant to NAU either direct admissions or, instead of rejection, an opportunity to start their education at a community college of their choice before continuing at NAU. Through data-sharing agreements between the university and community colleges, NAU refers the student to the community college, and if the student completes the required coursework, NAU will automatically admit them as a transfer student without reapplying, removing barriers and simplifying degree completion. As a result, students experience fewer administrative hurdles; stay on track academically; and have a more affordable, efficient path to completing their degree.

California State University (CSU) is using data-driven tools to simplify and streamline statewide college admissions. CSU has partnered with the California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI), California's official college and career planning platform, to simplify the admissions process. CCGI manages CaliforniaColleges.edu and works with the state's SLDS—the Cradle-to-Career Data System—to provide data access to support students, families, educators, and policymakers. Through CaliforniaColleges.edu, students can access electronic transcripts and track their eligibility for CSU admission. Ninth–11th graders receive personalized guidance to help them meet CSU admission requirements, and high school seniors can use a simplified application process. This resource helps students and families navigate admissions with greater clarity and certainty, reducing barriers and expanding access to in-state higher education opportunities.

The **Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE)** is providing direct admissions to public universities through statewide data systems, including matching among IBHE, the Illinois Community College Board, and the Illinois State Board of Education. IBHE's effort integrates data from the Common App into the Public University Uniform Admission Pilot Program. IBHE automates admission decisions by leveraging high school GPA, tracking eligibility, and providing fee waivers to create clear, data-driven enrollment pathways for high school seniors and community college transfers. IBHE also notifies high school students when they meet the admission requirements for public colleges or when postsecondary students complete the Universal Transfer pathway. As a result, both high school and postsecondary students benefit from a more accessible, efficient, and predictable admissions experience, reducing barriers to higher education.

PHILANTHROPIC EFFORTS TO DEVELOP STREAMLINED ADMISSIONS

Recent efforts, such as the Great Admissions Redesign (GAR), endeavor to fundamentally reimagine the admissions, enrollment, and financial aid systems to serve today's students better through streamlined admissions. Through the GAR challenge, the Lumina Foundation has supported seven states and institutions to explore and enact a variety of streamlined admissions programs and policies, including those highlighted in this document.