

STREAMLINED AND SIMPLIFIED

Using Data to Redesign Postsecondary Admissions



High school students face many challenges when applying to and enrolling in postsecondary education (e.g., two- and four-year college degree programs, professional training certification programs). Between trying to understand the options available to them, filling out repetitive applications, meeting different deadlines and criteria, and paying for each submission, students face a variety of obstacles that unnecessarily limit postsecondary access. And students seeking to transfer from one college to another face further difficulties in navigating a system that is often not designed with their specific needs in mind. **High-quality data is essential to streamlining the admissions process for students—and it is critical that state policy and education leaders, postsecondary education systems, and institutions proactively use data to offer students better pathway information and opportunities.**

Streamlined admissions policies illustrate how states and institutions can leverage data to benefit students. By simplifying application processes, personalizing outreach, and ensuring that students are efficiently connected to postsecondary pathways—whether they lead to degrees, certificates, or other valuable credentials—state policy and education leaders, K–12 and postsecondary education systems, and institutions can support students in enrolling in the program that best aligns with their unique needs and aspirations. While current admissions innovations are concentrated primarily within two- and four-year colleges and universities, they have the potential to extend to the larger postsecondary education landscape (e.g., apprenticeship and credentialing programs, financial aid and other support). Extending these data-informed innovations can improve and expand students’ access to postsecondary education.

Statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs)—which bring together data spanning early education, K–12, postsecondary, and the workforce (P–20W)—are powerful tools that connect data across the education continuum. SLDSs enable data use and sharing leading to data analysis and insights to inform programs and policies. Ultimately, they expand access to postsecondary opportunities. This resource examines the role of stronger data systems in addressing challenges and barriers students must currently overcome to access postsecondary education, highlights efforts states and institutions are undertaking to streamline the admissions process, and identifies best practices that have emerged in the field.

GREAT ADMISSIONS REDESIGN

In 2023, the Lumina Foundation launched the Great Admissions Redesign (GAR) to “work with states, higher education systems, and groups of colleges and universities ready to transform how potential students apply, enroll, and access their institutions.” The best practices highlighted throughout this resource emerged from the first cohort of GAR grantees as they worked to plan and implement admissions innovations.



What Are Streamlined Admissions?

The term “streamlined admissions” covers a diverse array of innovative policies and practices to make understanding postsecondary options, deciding on education pathways, and applying easier for students. A variety of innovative models fall under this umbrella, each with different mechanisms for using data to simplify and streamline some aspect of the admissions process. Examples include:

- ➔ **Direct admissions**, through which students are proactively notified that they have been *accepted* based on academic criteria;
- ➔ **Informed admissions**, through which students are notified that they are *assured admission* to at least one institution based on academic criteria but are still required to complete a traditional application process; and
- ➔ **Invitational admissions**, through which students are notified that they are *eligible* for admission and are encouraged to apply.

Each of these admissions models requires up-to-date student achievement data shared with admissions offices, further emphasizing the importance of P–20W data systems. Other examples of admissions innovations include efforts to simplify the financial aid application process and make it more transparent; admissions or transfer pathways, which simplify the process of applying to and transferring credits between institutions; test-optional or test-flexible policies, which reduce or eliminate the emphasis on standardized test scores; and the adoption of common application platforms. All of these innovations contribute to a more streamlined experience for applicants.

THE COMMON APP AND ILLINOIS’S UNIFORM ADMISSIONS INITIATIVE

The Common Application (Common App) simplifies the college admissions process by centralizing academic, demographic, and contextual data into one platform. This centralization simplifies the experience of applying to multiple schools and reduces the need for students to re-enter information across applications. It also gives institutions and states a clearer picture of students’ backgrounds and qualifications. For institutions and states, the data supports more coordinated outreach and can increase access for students who may not have strong advising support or who are applying to college on their own.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education’s Uniform Admissions Initiative uses the Common App as the backbone to streamline consistent data collection and application processes across participating institutions. The state leverages existing academic and enrollment data, such as grade point average, course completion, and other transcript information that schools already collect, to assess whether students meet minimum admissions requirements and determine eligibility. The Common App brings all of this information together in a single, centralized application, reducing duplication and allowing the institution to proactively identify eligible students and inform them of their admissions to participating public universities, simplifying the experience for students dramatically.

Although there are different approaches to streamlining admissions processes, the primary goal is to create a more transparent and accessible pathway to postsecondary education by reducing unnecessary barriers and burdens on students, allowing students that meet the necessary requirements to gain admission more efficiently. This goal is accomplished by leveraging existing data, automating aspects of the review, and focusing resources where they are needed.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

California State University (CSU) is exploring a streamlined admissions process that uses existing statewide data systems to remove barriers and expand access for students. CSU is partnering with CaliforniaColleges.edu, the state's official college and career planning platform, to support students, counselors, and families by integrating academic data, career exploration tools, and college planning resources. The platform receives verified high school transcript data directly from districts, allowing students to track their progress toward meeting CSU eligibility requirements starting in ninth grade.

As part of the admissions innovation effort, this data is now also being used by CSU to identify which seniors meet the minimum admissions requirements and—rather than requiring those students to fill out an application—proactively reach out to inform the student that they are admitted. CSU is currently piloting this innovation at its campus in Riverside but intends to expand the effort in the coming years. This approach simplifies decisionmaking, saves time, and helps students act on real opportunities, all while easing the administrative burden and increasing enrollment numbers for high schools and postsecondary institutions. These efforts are further supported by California's investment in the Cradle-to-Career Data System, which will connect education, workforce, and social service data to help inform policies and improve student outcomes.

The Benefits of Streamlined Admissions

Streamlined admissions innovations represent a fundamental shift in how state policy and education leaders, education systems, and postsecondary institutions approach student applications and the process of admitting students to college. These policies are designed to reduce the burden, uncertainty, and cost associated with the college application process; increase access to education; and support postsecondary transitions, particularly for students who may face additional barriers that compound the challenges of the traditional application systems. By leveraging available data, these changes can offer additional support to students and communities and make the college application process less daunting.

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Northern Arizona University (NAU) uses real-time data-sharing agreements with K–12 systems and community colleges to create seamless, student-centered pathways. Students who don't yet meet the admissions criteria for the university aren't rejected; instead they're assisted to enroll in a local community college. If the student finishes the required coursework, they will have a guaranteed transfer pathway to NAU. Ongoing data sharing allows NAU and its partners to track student progress, ensure credit transfer, and provide coordinated advising, helping more students stay on track, complete their degree, and successfully transition to and complete their education at a four-year institution.

Institutions can also benefit from streamlined admissions policies. By using data to reduce the amount of time and attention required to review applications for students who clearly meet established criteria, admissions officers can redirect their valuable time and expertise to applications that require more nuanced review. Additionally, these policies can increase enrollment at institutions by allowing students to better understand their postsecondary options or choose a pathway that they had not previously considered but works best for their needs. This shift can lead to a more strategically focused admissions process, aligning enrollment goals with efficient operational practices.

WASHINGTON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT COUNCIL

The Washington Student Achievement Council is exploring the possibility of integrating cross-agency data, connecting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program data with admissions and financial aid systems to proactively identify students who are eligible for guaranteed college financial aid. The council's approach is unique in recognizing that students facing basic needs insecurity also face additional, often compounding, barriers when navigating traditional college application and aid systems. Integrating cross-agency data can streamline admissions by ensuring that the students most at risk of being left behind are connected with support and understand their options. Washington's work shows that streamlined admissions can serve multiple goals, from administrative efficiency to advancing educational access and economic mobility.

While students should always be centered in streamlined admissions innovations, these changes can have further benefits. Using data to proactively 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. Ultimately, streamlined admissions efforts offer a more data-informed and efficient model of postsecondary application and admission and have far-reaching benefits for individuals, institutions, state policy and education leaders, and more.

Leveraging Data for Streamlined Admissions

Any efforts to streamline the admissions process require strong, secure data connections, ideally supported by a robust state data ecosystem. Seamless transfer of verified high school data (e.g., transcripts and test scores) from high schools to postsecondary institutions or between postsecondary institutions relieves students of the burden of manual data entry and document submission. An SLDS can also provide valuable information to high school counselors and others supporting students in their decisionmaking.

KENTUCKY COUNCIL ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education's work relies on its highly developed SLDS, housed in the Kentucky Center for Statistics. This robust infrastructure creates a strong foundation for designing a streamlined admissions process that uses real-time, cross-sector data to identify eligible students and support seamless enrollment. The state also benefits from established legislation that works to support data sharing and coordination across agencies, an essential condition for innovating admissions. Kentucky's combination of strong technical capacity and a supportive policy framework positions the state to implement student-centered admissions innovations that reduce barriers and improve transparency. Kentucky's efforts show how policy and infrastructure can help meaningfully affect streamlined admissions.

As state policy and education leaders are increasingly working to streamline college admissions processes to enhance efficiency, transparency, and student access, they are also facing challenges, including data integration issues, varying institutional priorities, and the need for technological infrastructure. In the absence of a robust SLDS, siloed data systems can limit the flow of secure student information from K-12 to postsecondary institutions. State agencies, K-12 and postsecondary education systems, and institutions may also lack the data infrastructure needed for proactive admissions strategies, or they may struggle to create high-quality data connections between the relevant institutions. Without high-quality longitudinal data, efforts to identify and support students effectively through streamlined application systems will not be successful. It is critical that state policy and education leaders pursue strategies and foster collaborative solutions that will facilitate the development of more effective and student-centered admissions pathways.

MY TEXAS FUTURE

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board is investing in the future of streamlined admissions through the development of My Texas Future, a centralized digital platform that helps students explore college and career options. Students can input their own academic information into My Texas Future to see which public universities they may qualify for before submitting a formal application, helping them make more informed decisions earlier in the postsecondary planning process. The platform also offers early planning features, including personalized eligibility insights, affordability tools, and potential direct admissions pathways to reflect the state's commitment to increasing transparency and reducing complexity in the postsecondary process. My Texas Future's student-centered model was codified in [Senate Bill 2314](#), which established protocols for secure data sharing between high schools and higher education institutions, ensuring that student information can be used effectively and responsibly to facilitate direct admissions and postsecondary information.

Best Practices for Streamlining Admissions

By leveraging existing data sources and strengthening source data systems, state policy and education leaders, systems, and institutions can create a more complete picture of student pathways and ease students' path to postsecondary education. A strong state data ecosystem allows for the development of both targeted interventions and proactive admissions strategies that simplify the process and place the student experience at the center.

To make this vision a reality, states should prioritize the following best practices for streamlining admissions.

1. Create the necessary conditions for success.

- ➔ **Build a culture of trust.** States and institutions must develop an environment in which data is not only valued but also readily accessible and used consistently to drive decisionmaking processes. To build trust and develop users' understanding of the value of data, leaders and communities alike must be confident in the reliability and accuracy of the data they are using.
- ➔ **Prioritize data governance.** The establishment of robust cross-sector data governance is essential for realizing the full potential of data to streamline admissions. Best practice [data governance](#) fosters collaboration and shared accountability among K–12, postsecondary, and other relevant education leaders. By aligning data-sharing agreements and establishing common goals, states and institutions can create a data ecosystem that reduces burden for both students and institutions.
 - To ensure the sustainability and broad impact of these efforts, codifying successful streamlined admissions policies into law, where appropriate, can provide a stable and consistent framework for implementation across institutions statewide.
- ➔ **Center privacy.** Transparency and simplicity must be central tenets in the development and implementation of streamlined admissions policies. By proactively obtaining informed consent from students and families regarding the use of their data for streamlining admissions, state and institutional leaders build trust and underscore their commitment to responsible

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.

data stewardship. Centering privacy also allows states and institutions to not only provide high school seniors with information about their options and progress but also reduce the burden of the application process itself.

- ➔ **Emphasize the role of data.** Data demonstrates a program's benefits or opportunities for improvement. Participating systems and institutions need to understand the value of this data not only for students but also for their own purposes.

2. Invest in modern, multiagency state data systems.

- ➔ **Invest in SLDSs.** SLDSs offer a powerful foundation for streamlining postsecondary admissions by leveraging integrated P–20W data and infrastructure, and they facilitate a crucial symbiotic relationship, allowing states to provide valuable data-driven insights to institutions while institutions can contribute their enrollment and success metrics back into the system. Accomplishing this ideal requires a seamless, secure, and controlled exchange of P–20W data among institutions, agencies, and key constituencies and a robust technical infrastructure and capacity to support data collection and analysis.
- ➔ **Develop data connections between sectors.** Although a robust SLDS represents the ideal, state policy and education leaders and institutions can also proactively forge stronger data connections between existing K–12 and postsecondary systems. Simultaneously, investing in robust source data systems at all levels is critical to ensure the quality and reliability of the information being exchanged. These targeted efforts to build data linkages and enhance data infrastructure can serve as effective short-term solutions, laying the groundwork for more streamlined processes and generating valuable insights even as the capacity for a comprehensive SLDS is being developed. The focus should be on facilitating timely data collection, reporting, and access to support efficient decisionmaking and on developing ways to incentivize robust data collection and reporting.
- ➔ **Prioritize individual-level data.** Accurate, complete, and identifiable data is critical to making innovative admissions policies work. To effectively streamline postsecondary admissions, states and institutions must prioritize the collection and use of individual-level longitudinal data. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of each student's educational journey from K–12 through postsecondary enrollment and the workforce. Additionally, all participating institutions should endeavor to ensure that students are identified and flagged within their systems and securely share that information with partners in a timely, transparent manner.
- ➔ **Strengthen data matching.** Accurate data matching is a difficult task under the best conditions, but it is essential to be able to provide students with the appropriate services and to track them within their program. High-quality data matching allows states and institutions to use student data to provide benefits to individual students, as well as review longitudinal trends.

3. Highlight the program's value and impact.

- ➔ **Demonstrate alignment with broader state goals.** Many states have attainment goals or other state education or workforce goals that can be advanced by improved high school outcomes and increased postsecondary enrollment. Highlighting the connections among improved data collection and analysis, streamlined admissions innovations, and the way those efforts can help accomplish wider state goals for policymakers and other data users can convey the large-scale benefits of these innovations.
- ➔ **Provide value to participating agencies, systems, and institutions.** To build and sustain strong participation in both data systems and admissions innovations, states must demonstrate the value of those efforts to contributing agencies, systems, and institutions. Participating entities are more likely to engage when they see clear benefits from the work they are responsible for undertaking. Providing value can be accomplished through a variety of methods, including offering simplified and improved

reporting processes and sharing meaningful data analysis to agencies and institutions that lack the staffing and data analysis capacity to make the best use of the data available.

- ➔ **Engage relevant or interested data users.** Building broad support and securing enthusiastic engagement from all relevant, affected, or interested parties is critical when pursuing streamlined admissions innovations. State policy and education leaders, systems, and institutions can uplift use cases and success stories through press coverage or other public awareness campaigns to build support for data-sharing initiatives and foster collaboration with partners and the public.

LOUISIANA BOARD OF REGENTS

The Louisiana Board of Regents is planning its admissions innovation work and is inviting partners to help develop a system that leverages student-level statewide data. The system will proactively inform college seniors when they meet postsecondary admission requirements at Louisiana's public institutions, inform transfer students when they have completed one of the state's new Universal Transfer Pathways, and connect that information directly to college admissions officers. The board is engaging with public colleges and universities and their systems, along with organizations from around the state that promote college access, to build momentum for direct student engagement and support. Building relationships, improving actionable consumer information, and reducing administrative barriers will increase college-going, support student success, and help Louisiana and its residents prosper.

4. Center students.

- ➔ **Develop processes and tools with students in mind.** Prioritizing user-friendly application and enrollment procedures minimizes unnecessary complexities and reduces barriers to access, ensuring a more successful experience for students. State policy and education leaders, systems, and institutions must employ user-informed design when building guidance, application, and acceptance tools, and they must prioritize the student experience when developing programs and processes.
- ➔ **Provide students with meaningfully accessible information.** To be effective, data ecosystems must provide access that empowers individuals, the public, education leaders, and policymakers to use the available data to make informed decisions, while ensuring that the data is privacy protected and appropriate to the user. As such, it is important that key audiences have access to appropriately personalized and identifiable data to support informed decisionmaking, while still protecting student privacy.
 - By analyzing trends in postsecondary completion, employment outcomes, and labor market needs, state policymakers can design programs that guide students toward pathways that offer a high likelihood of completion and result in high-paying careers in in-demand fields.

By adhering to these best practices, state policy and education leaders and institutions can create more efficient and student-focused pathways to postsecondary access and attainment.

Looking to the Future

Interest in streamlined admissions continues to spread, with more than 24 states now exploring innovations relying on data to streamline the process for students, including the following:

- ➔ **Georgia's** Georgia Match program guarantees college admission to high school seniors who meet established academic criteria, helping students understand their options earlier and streamline their decisionmaking process.
 - ➔ **Minnesota** offers automatic admissions to participating public colleges through its own direct admissions program, which includes participating public colleges across the state.
 - ➔ **New York** has expanded direct admissions across its State University of New York and City University of New York systems, aiming to increase access and reduce barriers to enrollment.
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Conclusion

Using data to streamline admissions for students makes the college application process much easier and more accessible, giving students more clarity and reducing the student's burden when applying to postsecondary education. It also offers benefits to institutions, systems, and states. By using existing data and creating new data connections, institutions, states, and systems can make better use of resources, help inform students of their options, and guide them to the right programs to meet their needs and interests. Ultimately, proactively using data to streamline admissions policies and practices represents a powerful opportunity to support students' postsecondary access and success—strengthening the overall postsecondary ecosystem.