

Recommendation **Six**

College Admission

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**The
College
Completion
Agenda**
State
Policy Guide

Produced in Collaboration with:



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
of STATE LEGISLATURES

One

Provide a program of voluntary preschool education, universally available to children from low-income families

Two

Improve middle and high school college and career counseling

Three

Implement the best research-based dropout prevention programs

Four

Align the K–12 education system with international standards and college admission expectations

Five

Improve teacher quality and focus on recruitment and retention

Six

Clarify and simplify the admission process

Seven

Provide more need-based grant aid while simplifying and making financial aid processes more transparent

Eight

Keep college affordable

Nine

Dramatically increase college completion rates

Ten

Provide postsecondary opportunities as an essential element of adult education programs

Background

The college admission decision-making process — who gets in and who doesn't — is regarded as the prerogative of the institution. It has not been an arena where state or federal authorities have stepped in to monitor or regulate. The exceptions are long-standing policies at public universities that attempt to improve access — for example, California students being guaranteed a place at a community college, a California state university or one of the UC system schools based on tiered eligibility requirements. The Texas Top 10 Percent policy is a more recent example of a legislature determining who should be offered admission to the state's public institutions.

State legislators face several policy issues that influence the admission process and can have significant implications for students' ability to go to college and complete a degree in a timely manner. Student participation patterns are very different than they were a decade ago because more students "swirl" among several institutions and take longer to complete their degrees. Many students are older than the "traditional" student and attend part time. In addition, states are preparing for dramatic demographic changes as illustrated plainly in the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education publication, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State and Race/Ethnicity 1992–2022*. Legislators are concerned about a new generation of college students, particularly first-generation and minority students who have traditionally been the least successful at getting to and graduating from higher education institutions. Institution-by-institution admission policies may not support overall state goals to increase access and success for all students.



A significant barrier to a college education is the perception held by many that the actual admission process — securing information about educational opportunities, choosing among options, filing applications, and understanding the selection process and its results — is overly complex and not easy to understand. Within the higher education community, however, there is considerable disagreement about the complexity of the process. There is general acknowledgment that even the most seemingly straightforward, easy-to-navigate process for college administrators is complex for some students and parents.

Competition among institutions for the “best and the brightest” often makes admission unpredictable and disappointing. In addition, decreases in state funding for public institutions create a dual admission process, one for in-state students and one for out-of-state students. This complicates access to state-supported institutions, particularly among in-state, middle-income students who feel squeezed out when space is reserved for low-income students or those who pay full out-of-state tuition. Students who are not admitted to the state institution, and who in previous years or generations almost certainly would have been, are disappointed and complain that the process is complicated and that the institution is not serving its constituents fairly.

Claims of complexity and unfairness cut across all types of colleges and universities. Some flagship state universities have straightforward application processes (a single electronic or paper page), while others rival the most complicated processes found at private colleges.

Over the years, efforts to make the process easier have resulted in the “common application” form. This allows college hopefuls to fill out only one form for hundreds of schools. Individual schools, however, may require additional material from applicants.

What Legislators Need to Know

In order to understand their current admission policies to evaluate potential reforms, legislators may want to seek answers to the following questions:

- What are the population growth trends in the state? What are the enrollment demands on state institutions for the next 10 to 20 years?
- What is the typical application process in state institutions? Is there a centralized process?
- Does the state higher education department sponsor a website to help students and families find information and compare institutions?
- What information is available to the public, to students and their families to explain the process? Who provides and updates this information?
- What is the level of state funding provided to state institutions, and is it changing?
- How many of the four-year colleges allow students to submit applications online?
- How many of the four-year colleges use the Common Application, Universal College Application, SuperAPP or the Common Black College Application?
- What percentage of the state's applicants to public institutions use a common application if one is available, and how has this changed over time?
- How many of the state's high school graduates immediately enroll in college?
- What percentage of students transfer from two- to four-year degree programs?
- What is the tuition structure in state institutions for in-state and out-of-state students?
- What are the state's transfer policies between community colleges and universities? Are there common course numbering or other agreements comparing the courses at different universities?

Research

The admission process is complex.

Significant anecdotal evidence exists for the claim that the college admission (and financial aid) process has become overly complicated. However, little credible research has been conducted on the subject to date. The College Board is currently conducting a quantitative research study with precisely this focus. The results will be available in late summer 2010. One collection of essays on the contemporary college admission process suggests that admission has become extremely competitive among the top institutions, and institutions are particularly driven by national and regional rankings in making their selections.¹ Rankings are often based on the test scores of the incoming freshmen and how many applications they receive, not on how well they reach out to underserved populations. A survey of members of the National Association for College Admission Counseling sought to determine how the current economic crisis has affected admission, college budgets and financial aid. Colleges and universities are increasing the number of students who are admitted under early-decision plans and who are more likely to pay full tuition, leaving less space for regular admits and creating larger waiting lists.²

Several factors are important in admission decisions.

A report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling polls college admission officers each year to determine what factors are the most important in admission decisions and to determine trends in admission office functions, staff, budgets and operations. The category of “operations,” coupled with “important factors,” offers insights into institutional policies and practices that drive the admission cycle each year and is often the source of complaints about complexity and lack of transparency.³

There is little agreement about secondary school preparation for college admission.

A report by the College Board's Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century explores 10 significant indicators of the educational health of the country, including admission and financial aid standards and practices.⁴ The report asks, "How hard is it for a student to gain admission to a four-year college or university in the United States?" Part of the answer, the report offers, is the surprising notion that there is little agreement by colleges on what they want applicants to have studied in high school. This makes understanding college requirements for admission difficult and illustrates the continued need to align state school standards with a recognized body of courses that, most agree, prepares students for college success. Until we achieve this goal, the admission process will be complex.

Low-income students face additional obstacles.

Another College Board report focuses on the challenges facing low-income students. Some of the problems include the nature of counseling services available to students and the effect of "talent search" programs on encouraging and overcoming the "information deficits" among low-income students. Further complicating the process is the fact that parents may be unfamiliar with college applications, the role community colleges play in providing services to underserved populations, and the lack of research exploring what sorts of financial aid information are most helpful to students and parents.⁵ A volume of collected essays on the problems of access to higher education for low-income students suggests that the lack of clarity and transparency in the admission process is a particular barrier to low-income students.⁶

State Policy Approaches



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Low Cost

Provide and encourage information/outreach.

A powerful but low-cost way to improve acceptance in college among traditionally underserved students is to support outreach programs. Many of these programs already exist, and many postsecondary institutions manage outreach programs in local elementary and secondary schools. The Southern Regional Education Board's Go Alliance is an interstate cooperative that works to increase college awareness and attendance by marketing the benefits of a college education. Go Alliance sends clear messages to students about the importance of graduating from high school, how to get ready for college, and how to overcome common financial and personal barriers. Member states jointly develop and share college marketing materials (such as radio and television spots, research, posters and brochures) as well as ideas about programs that directly reach students.⁷

Improve the complexity/transparency of the admission process.

Complexity is often the result of many factors. In most states there are fewer spots for incoming students at the state flagship universities. Financial aid practices that reduce need-based assistance and increase merit money to compete for the "best and the brightest" cause anxiety on the part of middle-income families. The shift to find more students able to pay full tuition to generate operating revenue leads to accusations that admissions are made not on the merit of a student's record but on the ability to pay — or worse still — admitting lesser qualified students who can pay and denying admission to more able but more needy students. Finally, the increasing number of prospective first-generation and low-income students who lack the resources or experience to understand the process adds to the complexity of the problem.

North Carolina and **Pennsylvania** utilize innovative centralized application processing whereby all applications go to a central place. Students indicate which participating institutions in the system they wish to be considered for and those institutions receive the records. The institutions evaluate the records and then notify the students of the decision.

In **New York**, the SUNY and CUNY systems also use centralized application processing.



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Medium Cost

Adjust admission criteria.

Admission criteria are adjusted to accommodate changes in institutional priorities, increased selectivity, or the desire to improve the institution's rankings, status and prestige. These changes work counter to the desire to serve an increasingly diverse student population. Students who would previously have been admitted are denied, and admission for formerly underserved students becomes even more remote at top institutions.

In **North Carolina**, the Carolina Covenant helps qualified low-income students attend the University of North Carolina and graduate debt-free if they work on campus 10 to 12 hours a week in federal work-study jobs. The University of North Carolina was the first public university in America to launch such an initiative.

In **Virginia**, the AccessUVA program (adopted in the fall of 2004) is designed to increase the number of underrepresented, low-income undergraduate students enrolled at the university.

The **Texas** 10 Percent Plan was created in 1997 in response to a federal appeals court decision known as the *Hopwood* ruling that barred public colleges in Texas from considering race or ethnicity in admission.⁸ The plan ensures admission to the University of Texas for the top 10 percent of students in every state high school. As in most states, Texas has many high schools with predominantly black or Latino populations, so this plan ensures that these students can get into a university. The plan has significantly changed the University of Texas's admission authority, and may contribute to a student body that is ultimately less successful in the system.

Retool tuition policy.

Differential tuition can also determine which students are admitted to public institutions — for example, favoring out-of-state students (who pay more) over in-state residents. Similarly, financial aid policies (need based versus merit based; state-sponsored tuition reduction schemes) need to be evaluated in the context of the changing population and the institutional mission.



Improve articulation and transfer.

Today, nearly 50 percent of all higher education students in the country today are enrolled in community colleges. But these students face barriers when switching colleges if it is difficult to transfer credits from a community college to a university. Articulation agreements make classes at community colleges and state universities equivalent. This makes it easier for community college students to transfer. Transfer policy is an important tool for supporting student access and success.

Florida has one of the strongest transfer records in the nation. By state law, every community college graduate is considered to have met all general education requirements and is guaranteed admission as a junior to a state university. **North Carolina** has a similar program.

Ohio's Articulation and Transfer Policy⁹ is one of the most comprehensive statewide policies. Adopted by the Board of Regents in 1990 and continually improved by the legislature to ensure flexibility for students, the policy includes a universal course equivalency system and guaranteed admission to state universities by students who complete an associate degree at a technical or community college.

Ensure there is sufficient space in higher education for growing populations.

Legislators may want to consider whether there are enough spaces to meet future demand. With demographic changes cited by WICHE and other changes that occur in the demographics of the nation's college-bound populations, institutions should consider whether they are well positioned to accommodate their current institutional mission with respect to access. Are they flexible enough to change that mission if changing demographics make the current mission unrealistic or unattainable? How do you provide more opportunities for the students now entering the education system in the state and in the nation?



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High Cost

Rethink finance policy.

Legislators can give incentives to institutions to enroll and serve particular students. But budget cuts to higher education can affect how entering classes are selected, which admission standards will be in place, and to which students these standards will apply, as institutions respond to the need to generate adequate operating income.

Link financial aid and admission policies.

Several states have merit-based financial aid programs that also ensure admission to an in-state institution for students who do well in high school. Need-based financial aid helps students afford college but does not guarantee admission. Institutional aid is often used for the most desirable rather than the neediest students. Shrinking need-based financial aid and dramatically increased merit-based awards, especially among public institutions, are creating considerable public (and federal) scrutiny. It is renewing public concern over how resources are moving away from students who are truly needy to more affluent students who are considered meritorious.

The **Georgia** Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) Scholarship was designed to prevent “brain drain” from the state by offering financial assistance to students who meet a 3.0 GPA in core college-preparatory classes or a 3.2 GPA for regular diploma types. Developed in 1993, the merit-based program is financed by the Georgia lottery and rewards academic achievement with a scholarship that covers tuition, fees and books at a state public college or university or up to \$3,500 per year for students who attend private colleges or universities in Georgia.

The **Indiana** 21st Century Scholars Program guarantees low- and moderate-income students access to higher education. A student who graduates from high school with a rigorous curriculum, an Indiana High School Diploma and at least a 2.0 GPA, and has stayed out of the criminal justice system is guaranteed four years of financial assistance at a participating state college or university.

Take Action

1 Collect a database of successful policy-driven innovations in admission that have influenced the process.



Short-Term

2 Conduct market survey research with parents and students on their frustrations with the complexity of the admission process.



Short-Term

3 Conduct similar surveys of secondary school and college admission staff.



Short-Term

4 Talk to the admission staff at colleges and universities to better understand their jobs, their challenges and how different state policies affect (both positively and negatively) their process.



Short-Term

5 Learn all you can about state transfer policies and study how policy changes might affect admission.



Mid-Term

6 Inventory state policies that affect admission decisions, such as guaranteed admission programs. Evaluate the effect these policies have on improving access for targeted populations and the consequences for universities.



Mid-Term

7 Conduct a thorough study of state college enrollment trends and the capacity of institutions to accommodate anticipated growth.



Long-Term

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Notes

1. Wayne J. Camara, and E.W. Kimmel, *Choosing Students: Higher Education Admission for the 21st Century* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 2005).

2. National Association for College Admission Counseling, *Effects of the Economy on the Admissions Process* (Arlington, VA: NACAC, 2009).

3. National Association for College Admission Counseling, *State of College Admissions* (Arlington, VA: NACAC, 2009).

4. College Board, *Preserving the Dream of America: A Message to a Community of Educational Leaders* (New York: The College Board, 2008).

5. College Board, *Getting Ready, Getting In, and Getting Through College: Expanding Options for Low-Income Students* (New York: The College Board, 2007).

6. Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, *College Access: Opportunity or Privilege?* (New York: The College Board, 2006).

7. See: www.collegeaccessmarketing.org/goalliance.

8. *Texas et al. v. Cheryl J. Hopwood et al.*, 1996.

9. See: www.regents.Ohio.gov/transfer/polic/index.php.

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NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues, and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

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- To promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- To ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

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