



Experimental Evidence on "Direct Admissions" from Four States: Impacts on College Application and Enrollment

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EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE ON “DIRECT ADMISSIONS” FROM FOUR STATES: IMPACTS ON COLLEGE APPLICATION AND ENROLLMENT

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Data for this project come from a restricted-use agreement the private Common App and cannot be shared. However, the authors will publicly post our programs for review, provide guidance on independently obtaining these data, and cooperate with investigators seeking to replicate our work. The Common App has reviewed this paper for analyses, methods, and use of data for compliance prior to submission and independently replicated the analysis with equivalent findings.

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INTRODUCTION

The college application process has been described as a “gauntlet,” where students face unclear and uneven information points, multiple steps toward preparation, and varying deadlines and admission requirements (Klasik 2012). This has resulted in persistent and often widening gaps in college enrollment and attainment by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography (Deming and Dynarski 2009; Hillman 2016; Baker, Klasik, and Reardon 2018). Prior research on the college application process suggests the current admissions system itself increases equity gaps by requiring students to rely on substantial levels of social and cultural capital to search for, apply to, and enroll in college (Hoxby and Turner 2013). These practices also typically target admissions supports toward students who are already most likely to enroll in college (Hoxby and Avery 2012). Indeed, beyond complexities in the college *search* process, the act of “simply” *applying* to college often requires students to complete an individual application for each institution, where they face unclear steps, juggle various deadlines, attend to distinct application requirements, pay multiple application fees, and navigate various processes all while facing substantial informational and financial constraints (Oreopoulos and Ford 2019; Dynarski et al. 2021; Burland et al. 2023). These barriers are particularly large for students from low-income families, students of color, and those who will be the first in their family to attend college, leading many to abandon postsecondary pursuits altogether, or to apply to institutions of lower academic quality or with fewer resources (Dynarski et al. 2022; Shi 2026).

Prior works show that strategies to reduce “frictions” or administrative burdens that students face when applying to college should be effective at raising application and enrollment

rates but often yield null impacts (Bergman, Denning, and Manoli 2019; Hyman 2020; Oreopoulos 2020; Gurantz et al. 2021). These include several discrete informational, financial, technological, and behavioral interventions. Notable exceptions, however, are targeted interventions that not only *combine* information and financial support but that also ease the administrative burdens of the college-going process such as streamlined common applications, FAFSA simplification and completion assistance, or guaranteed financial aid (Bettinger et al. 2012; Dynarski et al. 2021; Knight and Schiff 2022; Burland et al. 2023). This literature includes both nudges, which encourage a behavioral change but keep options intact, and shoves, which restrict choice (Oreopoulos 2020). These can be delivered through technology (e.g., text messages, informational interventions, etc.) or personal assistance, which involves human interaction, in either low- or high-touch interventions (Avery 2013; Oreopoulos 2020; Mulhern 2021; Bird and Castleman 2023; Gallego et al. 2023). Similarly, literature that considers changing default decisions would imply that changes in choice architecture should yield behavioral changes, although that literature has not tested college admissions practices (Madrian and Shea 2001; Carroll et al., 2009; Chetty et al. 2014; Bernheim, Fradkin, and Popov 2015). One emerging strategy is “direct admissions” that reduces administrative burdens and offers a small targeted financial support (an automatic application fee waiver) combined with proactive notification and an admission guarantee.¹

Direct admissions side-steps the typical college admissions process by *proactively* admitting students to college. In this model, high school students are *guaranteed* a place in college based on existing data (e.g., GPA and/or standardized test scores) and are proactively informed of

¹ In the terminology of intervention types described by Oreopoulos (2020) and Gallego (2023), direct admissions would likely be categorized as a “nudge” since it does not require participation or reduce choice. However, we do not exclusively use this term since elements of direct admissions (such as automatic application fee waivers) are more costly and intensive interventions than typical nudges (such as text message reminders about paperwork deadlines). Similarly, the inclusion of trusted adults in direct admissions systems puts these programs in a higher-touch personal intervention category, although this categorization also does not neatly fit since the adults involved do not receive training as part of the intervention as would be typical in mentoring or coaching programs.

their admission guarantee with an official college acceptance letter. Students also receive tailored college-going information and an automatic application fee waiver so they can submit a simplified form—rather than a full application—to “claim their place” in college. Direct admissions represents a unique innovation of the college application process and has the potential to change students’ college-going behaviors through the reduction of administrative burdens, proactive information, financial support, and offering a guaranteed place in college. Rather than overcoming learning, compliance, and psychological costs such as present bias, loss aversion, and other hazards when deciding whether to get “on the college-going pathway” (Pallais 2015), direct admissions *automatically* offers students early, personalized, and guaranteed admissions to college.

A proactive notification of their guaranteed college admission is a powerful change in framing for many students, particularly when direct admissions is based on prior academic performance (e.g., GPA and/or standardized test scores). There are wide racial/ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in students’ expectations to ever enroll in college (Odele 2022). These are driven in part by students’ beliefs that they have little “college potential.” In a recent survey of over 20,000 high schoolers, 26% cited “whether I’ll be successful in college” as a top reason to not enroll, ranking only behind affordability and concerns for other costs (Education Advisory Board 2023). For students who have yet to apply to college or who may not be considering postsecondary education at all, a direct admissions letter and its associated supports not only provide a *first postsecondary option* to move students onto the college-going pathway but also signals that their prior academic performance has already *qualified* them for admission to college, highlighting their college potential and helping them to overcome biases. The informational components of this intervention are important even if admission is proactively given at open access or nonselective institutions. In this way, direct admissions “flips the script” to proactively inform

students that they are qualified for college and, in tandem, reduces the administrative burdens involved in the steps they must take to enroll. Multiple states and hundreds of postsecondary institutions have begun to operate some form of direct admissions, and emerging evidence on these policies suggest positive impacts on enrollment at the state and institutional levels (Odle and Delaney 2022; Delaney et al. 2023; Odle 2023).

Despite developing evidence and growing adoption, little is known about the impacts of direct admissions practices on student-level application and enrollment outcomes. To inform research and policy in this area, our study leverages a large-scale, multi-state experiment with the non-profit Common App and six universities where we randomly assigned nearly 32,000 students to either receive a direct admissions offer and an automatic application fee waiver or to a business-as-usual condition. Equipped with administrative records from the Common App, the nation's largest college application provider, paired with National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) records on subsequent postsecondary enrollments, we present the first causal impacts of direct admissions on student-level outcomes. To our knowledge, this also represents one of the largest randomized controlled trials in the literature on higher education.

We find that students who are proactively informed of their automatic and guaranteed admission—and offered automatic application fee waivers alongside a simplified application form—are approximately 2.7 percentage points (or 12%) more likely to subsequently submit a college application overall and are nearly twice as likely to apply to the institution where they were offered direct admission. These impacts are larger for racially minoritized (3-6 percentage points more likely to submit a college application), first-generation (4 points), and low-income (5 points) students. We also find that students are more responsive to direct admissions offers when they are proactively admitted to larger, higher quality institutions defined as having larger undergraduate

student bodies and higher graduation rates. We do not, however, observe any significant impacts on students' subsequent enrollment behaviors.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide background on the diffusion of direct admissions systems and review related literature. We then discuss our conceptual framing, introduce the Common App, our data, and the experimental intervention. We follow with a presentation of our identification strategy and results. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, their relation to prior studies, and their implications for policy, practice, and future work.

DIRECT ADMISSIONS BACKGROUND AND RELATED LITERATURE

Direct admissions systems integrate multiple interventions into a single program designed to change the college admissions process and put more students on a college-going pathway. Direct admissions provides (1) *proactive, early, and personalized* information on college admissions to help mitigate longstanding informational barriers at a critical decision point for students; (2) a *guaranteed* place in college that reduces uncertainty and risk since students have already been admitted; (3) *structural simplification* of the application itself, reducing the negative impacts of unevenly distributed social and cultural capital and the time costs of applying to college; and (4) modest *financial support* through automatic application fee waivers, further reducing the direct financial costs associated with applying to college.

In fall 2015, Idaho became the first state to adopt a direct admissions policy that proactively admitted all high school students to in-state public two and/or four-year institutions based on ACT/SAT scores, unweighted GPA, and high school course credits (Odle and Delaney 2022). Since then, the policy has diffused nationally. State or system level “direct,” “automatic,” or “proactive” admissions programs are found in multiple states including California (California State

University), Connecticut (Connecticut State Colleges & Universities), Georgia (University System of Georgia), Hawaii, Idaho, Missouri, Minnesota, New York (The City University of New York and State University of New York), Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin (Universities of Wisconsin) (Idaho Next Steps; Delaney and Odle 2022; Donaldson 2023; Education Strategy Group 2023; Jaschik 2023b; McCray 2023; Obradovich 2024; Office of Governor Ned Lamont 2021; Office of the Texas Governor, 2024; Schwartz, 2024). South Dakota began direct admissions in 2018 but discontinued it during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, legislative proposals to adopt direct admissions are circulating in Illinois (Illinois General Assembly, 2021). Beyond these state and system adoptions, hundreds of independent postsecondary institutions across the United States currently operate direct admissions through third-party providers such as Concourse, Niche, and Sage Scholars, which leverage their student user base to connect prospective students with partner colleges (Nietzel 2022; Jaschik 2023a). In addition, the non-profit Common App launched a direct admissions program in Fall 2023 that includes 71 institutions in 28 states (Common App 2023). While multiple definitions of direct admissions exist across different programs, we are focused on programs with design elements that are most likely to impact student behavior, not direct admissions systems that are primarily advertising interventions (like the system in Georgia), only serve high-achieving students (like the Top 10% direct admissions plan at SUNY), or require students to submit more information than in a traditional college admissions system (as is common with direct admissions programs offered by for-profit providers).

Direct admission policies are attractive to states and institutions because they represent relatively low-cost interventions that could meaningfully improve declining enrollments. Direct admissions policies leverage existing datasets (e.g., state longitudinal data systems that contain students' GPA and/or ACT/SAT scores) and require minimal resources to send students'

acceptance letters. For example, Minnesota's piloted program cost approximately \$1 million across two years (Nietzel 2021), which is a small fraction of the costs of other strategies like a statewide financial aid program or individualized college supports (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016).

Despite this growing adoption, little is known about the impact of direct admissions practices on student outcomes, and the literature on direct admissions programs is sparse. The one quasi-experimental study to-date on direct admissions evaluated state- and institution-level impacts of Idaho's program. Odle and Delaney (2022) found early evidence that direct admissions increased institutional first-time undergraduate enrollments by 4-8% (50-100 students per campus on average) and total in-state enrollment levels by approximately 8-15% (80-140 students) but had minimal-to-no impacts on the enrollment of Pell-eligible students, likely reflecting the lack of integration of student financial aid in the direct admissions system. These enrollment gains were concentrated among 2-year, open-access institutions.

There is a growing body of qualitative evidence on direct admissions programs that illuminates how direct admissions letters may influence students' college-going decisions. In a survey of over 1,400 students in Idaho's direct admissions program, one noted that "The application process can be scary for teens, and rejection is not easy. So it was nice to get a letter of preapproved acceptance for some colleges" (Howell 2018, pp. 68-69). Others said: "I didn't think any college would accept me, but I was wrong" and "I knew I wanted to go to college, but I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Once I got the letter my whole mindset changed. I knew I could do it" (p. 69). Subsequent interviews with reporters have revealed similar sentiments: "My parents didn't have the chance to go to college, and yet here I was first-gen and had direct admission to all the colleges in Idaho... It was one of my proudest moments where I felt, 'This is possible.' ...a lot of kids... just completely rule themselves out as college material" (West 2020). These quotes

underscore that direct admissions appears to reduce administrative burdens of the college-going process and help students move onto a college-going pathway.

Institutional administrators and college advisors also see the strong potential of direct admissions programs at reducing administrative burdens. One senior institutional leader noted “We’ve always got to remove barriers to entry. And what’s the ultimate barrier to entry? The application” (Hoover 2023). Another asked, “If we could be doing it in this easier way, why, for so long, have we been putting ourselves through so much tedious work? Hours and hours of tedious work?” “Most of us are not Harvard, Princeton, and Yale,” another said. “The process doesn’t need to be so difficult for students applying to the vast majority of colleges” (Hoover 2023). Indeed, in a survey of over 1,000 students by the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, over 60% of Black, Hispanic, and Asian students listed college applications as “their most stressful academic experience” (Bauer-Wolf, 2023).

To inform research and policy in this area, our study leverages a large-scale, multi-state experiment to estimate the first causal impacts of direct admissions on *student-level outcomes*, including student application and enrollment behaviors. In doing so, we investigate the combined effects of proactive notification, early information, a guarantee of admission, structural simplification of the application form, and an automatic application fee waiver.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

This work extends the administrative burden and higher education literatures. Conceptually, we frame our study using the theory of administrative burden from the fields of public administration, social welfare, and political science. We also interweave concepts of price

reduction, additional supports, and uncertainty reduction in our conceptual model to capture all elements of direct admissions programs as a policy intervention.

The theory of administrative burden is focused on the rules, processes, forms, and bureaucracies that block individuals from receiving a benefit (Herd & Moynihan 2019, 2018). Administrative burdens have systemic impacts that create barriers that limit or fully restrict the ability of individuals to gain access to public goods, resources, and services (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Administrative burden theory argues that the burden of administrative barriers is often felt disproportionately by individuals with the fewest resources, including financial and intellectual resources, social and cultural capital, and more. (For a discussion of disproportionate burdens, see for instance, Herd and Moynihan 2019 or Rosinger, Meyer, and Wang 2021. For a discussion of the negative impacts of unevenly distributed social and cultural capital and time costs, see Hyman 2020; Knight and Schiff 2022).² Originally developed to study citizens interacting with governments, the administrative burden theory is applicable to the college application process since colleges and universities are large bureaucratic organizations, and public institutions are, in most cases, part of state governments. Students applying to college resemble citizens, public service customers, and/or taxpayers seeking a benefit from a government service (in this case, postsecondary education, where they must apply and complete multiple steps prior to entry).

The theory of administrative burden has been used across multiple disciplines, including education (Campbell et al. 2022). Specifically, it has been used to develop theory and has been empirically tested in the higher education literature. Citing the theory as underutilized, Gándara

² Red tape theory from the field of public administration could also be used as part of our conceptual model. On this point, Campbell et al. (2022) conclude in their meta-narrative review of both the red tape and the administrative burden literatures that the two theories can be used interchangeably. We chose to use administrative burden since it is more focused on the experience of individuals navigating bureaucratic systems than the effectiveness and efficiency of the bureaucracy itself. We also find the administrative burden theory more useful in expressing the inequities inherent in bureaucratic barriers when comparing differently advantaged groups.

et al. (2024) present a framework of racialized administrative burdens in higher education policy. Small-scale, “nudge” interventions have been popular in shaping student behavior, typically by encouraging students to complete administrative tasks and meet deadlines (Gallego et al., 2023). For example, behavioral interventions have been tested to help students complete pre-enrollment processes (Castleman and Page 2015; Castleman, Owen, and Page 2015; Page and Gehlbach 2017; Mulhern 2021) and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is used to provide student financial aid awards from both federal and numerous state, institutional, and private scholarship programs (Castleman and Page 2016; Page, Castleman, and Meyer 2020; Bird et al. 2021). With means-tested (or “need-based”) student aid, administrative burdens have been shown to discourage uptake (Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2006; Bettinger et al. 2012; Dynarski and Wiederspan 2012; Scott-Clayton 2013; Dynarski et al. 2021; Burland et al. 2023). Likewise, the need to complete paperwork discourages the use of college application fee waivers among students who would qualify, which in turn decreases college applications, especially among high achieving, low-income students (Hoxby and Turner 2013). Reduction of administrative burdens has been shown to impact take-up of student loans, loan amounts, and repayment options (Barr, Bird, and Castleman 2021; Darolia and Harper 2018; Marx and Turner 2018, 2019; Rosinger 2017, 2019). This literature collectively shows that reducing administrative burdens encourages students to complete administrative tasks and to meet important deadlines. Reducing burdens also increases program participation and influences intended outcomes.

Learning, compliance, and psychological costs—the three types of burdens defined within the administrative burden framework—apply to the college application process (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Compared to a traditional college admissions process in which a unique application is needed for each institution, learning costs related to determining

eligibility and understanding the application process are reduced in a direct admissions system. The proactive structure of direct admissions sends preemptive information to students. This information has been shown to mitigate informational asymmetries at a critical decision point for students (see for instance, Avery and Kane 2004; Bettinger et al. 2012; Bird et al. 2021; Hoover 2023). Because admissions criteria are plain, clearly known, discoverable through a single source, and, in some cases, common across multiple campuses, direct admissions increases transparency. Straightforward, individualized information relayed in direct admissions systems is both simple and personalized. Finally, in some iterations of direct admissions, students need to use only one application to apply to multiple colleges. As such direct admissions reduces learning costs by increasing awareness of postsecondary options. Students may not be aware of all of the campuses where they are qualified to attend, and direct admissions provides personalized information about new and/or additional campus options.

Compliance costs are also reduced with direct admissions systems since applications are simplified (e.g., fewer questions, no essays, and no recommendation letters), and most application elements only need to be entered once as opposed to traditional admissions systems that require students to input the same information for each institution where they apply. Typically, existing data is used such that students do not enter most application elements and only need to submit a vastly simplified application to “claim their spot” *after* they have already been guaranteed admission to an institution. Direct admissions systems also typically provide earlier notifications of admissions decisions (i.e., notifications in the fall of a high school student’s senior year instead of spring notifications, which are more typical under traditional admissions systems that do not use special programs like early decision).

Psychological costs of administrative burdens are also reduced through direct admissions systems. The stigma related to sharing personal and academic information (such as GPA, standardized test scores, and more) is faced only once. Fear of rejection is mitigated since students do not need to apply to direct admissions institutions and students are only informed of the institutions where they already have *guaranteed* admission.³

Direct admissions also includes three elements that fall outside of an administrative burden framework: direct financial support, the inclusion of trusted adults, and uncertainty reduction. Direct admissions systems offer a direct financial benefit: automatic application fee waivers. Unlike in traditional admission systems that make fee waivers available for low-income students but require students to complete paperwork to apply for the waivers, direct admissions fee waivers are automatically granted and, in many systems, are universally granted to all students. The elimination of even a small application fee with no paperwork has been shown to increase college application submission and the selectivity of institutions where high achieving, low-income students apply (Hoxby and Turner 2013; Gurantz et al. 2021).

Direct admissions systems also typically include trusted adults by sending notification not only to students but also to their parents, high school counselors, and principals. We believe that this feature of the program serves two primary purposes. First, it increases the legitimacy of the program. Because direct admissions systems are new, establishing that it is not a “too-good-to-be-true” scam, is important. Second, the inclusion of trusted adults also reduces the probability that direct admissions notifications will be ignored or overlooked by students. In addition, involving

³ Administrative burdens are also reduced for postsecondary institutions using direct admissions. These systems are relatively low-cost since they use existing data such as those held in state longitudinal data systems. Direct admissions systems are also less labor intensive to operate since large admissions staff are not required to read applications. When using the existing Common App platform (as discussed in the next section), no additional websites or forms are needed, and staff is already familiar with the format and use of application data from the Common App. However, these reductions in administrative burden for institutions are not discussed in detail since this paper is focused on student outcomes.

trusted adults gives students someone they know that they can engage in conversations about which postsecondary institution might be the best fit for them.

The guarantee of a place in college makes college admissions a “sure thing,” thereby reducing uncertainty inherent in the traditional college-going process. Students often only get one chance to select a college when leaving high school; a situation ripe with risk aversion.⁴ The admissions guarantee shifts the probability of acceptance. For example, under a traditional admissions system, at an open access institution with a 70% acceptance rate a student would face a probability of acceptance of 0.7 at the time they submit an application to be reviewed. Under a direct admissions guarantee this probability shifts to 1. This 0.3 increase in probability of acceptance reflects the value of the guarantee (see related literature on reducing risk and uncertainty in the college admissions and transfer processes such as Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2006; Dynarski et al. 2021; Shi 2026). Prior literature has shown that students have a savvy understanding of the value of a guarantee in the transition to college (Burland et al. 2023).

THE COMMON APP AND OUR RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

The Common App is the nation’s largest college application provider that supports over 1.1 million unique students per year (Common App n.d.). The Common App simplifies students’ college application process by allowing them to submit one common form to multiple colleges and universities, while also providing supports to manage deadlines, letters of recommendation, and application fees (or fee waivers) in one location. The Common App is a non-profit membership organization that, during the 2019-20 college application cycle, facilitated the submission of 5.6 million applications and 25 million recommendation letters to over 900 colleges and universities

⁴ While the US higher education system is designed to allow for multiple entry points and enables transfer among institutions, students only receive one chance to make a first college-going decision after leaving high school.

across all 50 states and 20 countries (Common App 2021). While 72% of Common App member colleges are private (22% are public and 6% are international), Common App users overwhelmingly come from public high schools (75%), and, among those students, approximately one third are first-generation, and 43% are from racial and ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Common App 2020, 2021).

When students create a Common App profile, in addition to providing e-mail contact information, they report a basic set of directory information that captures their academic and demographic profiles, including information on their academic history (high school GPA value and scale; ACT/SAT scores), race/ethnicity, gender, nationality/citizenship status, and military status. Students also provide information on their socioeconomic contexts by identifying whether they will be a first-generation college student (defined as being the first in their family to attain a bachelor's degree or higher) or whether they would like to request a Common App fee waiver (a proxy for low-income/low-socioeconomic status) based on program rules.⁵ Finally, students also list their current high school and provide their residential zip code, allowing the Common App to connect the student to external directory information on high schools via the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data and communities via the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), among others. These student profiles can then be paired with administrative data from the Common App, which capture, among others, students' engagement with the platform (including log-in session counts) and the full universe of Common App

⁵ Students may apply for a fee waiver through the Common App as part of their profile, but, if they are as part of the direct admissions program, they automatically receive a fee waiver along with all other students. As such we only use the student request of a fee waiver while completing their profile as a flag for income status in the study. The Common App has a generous fee waiver eligibility policy. Fee waivers are provided to students if they are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, received an ACT or SAT fee waiver, receive any public assistance, or meet other eligibility criteria. More information may be found here:

<https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/What-do-I-need-to-know-about-the-Common-App-fee-waiver>

application behaviors (including whether and where any applications were submitted), as well as NSC records on students' postsecondary enrollments.

Given that direct admission programs operate by (1) observing pre-college students' academic profiles, (2) measuring their performance against set admissions thresholds, and (3) proactively communicating with a student to inform them of their guaranteed admission to an institution, the Common App is an ideal partner to facilitate a direct admissions program. The Common App has access to a national population of over 1 million students' high school GPAs and ACT/SAT scores, including those for students enrolled in public and private K-12 schools. This allows the Common App to, in partnership with a college or university, observe its universe of users (including those in a defined geographic area or with specific demographic features), compare students' reported performance against an admissions threshold set by the institution, and proactively contact students with a direct admissions offer on behalf of the college. This is particularly advantageous for institutions in states without an existing direct admissions program or without access to a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) that could allow postsecondary partners to observe K-12 students' academic performance and contact information. Though, even with the advent of an SLDS, such records are typically only accessible to public institutions and typically only capture public K-12 student enrollments, thereby excluding students at private K-12 schools and private postsecondary institutions.

Our study relies on a unique partnership between researchers, the Common App, and six universities. Equipped with information on students' academic performance and their state of residence via Common App records, we developed admission criteria in partnership with individual institutions. We then leveraged the Common App's universe of users to identify in-state students who met institutionally-defined eligibility thresholds, randomized students to treatment

or control conditions, and proactively provided direct admissions decisions and automatic fee waivers (if treated). Then, paired with NSC records, tracked students' subsequent application and enrollment behaviors.

DATA, PILOT SITES, SAMPLE, AND RANDOMIZATION

In partnership with the Common App, we recruited six public and private four-year universities to participate in a direct admissions pilot experiment. These institutions span four southern and mid-Atlantic states. To preserve institutional anonymity, we leverage a naming convention at the state-by-institution level: A, B, C1, C2, D1, and D2. States A and B each had one participating institution; states C and D each had two institutions (1 and 2). Directory information on our partner institutions is provided in Table I. These institutions span the public and private, not-for-profit sectors and capture a wide range of institutional types, from research intensive universities to baccalaureate colleges, and include two Historically Black Colleges and Universities and two Hispanic Serving Institutions. Campuses range from a small undergraduate population of less than 1,000 to a large campus of nearly 27,000. All are moderately-selective to open-access institutions (60-90% acceptance rate) and serve considerable numbers of Pell-eligible students (30-80% of all undergraduate students). Average net prices range from less than \$13,000 to nearly \$27,000, and six-year bachelor's degree graduation rates range from 40-70%.

Institutions committed to proactively admit a specified number of in-state high school students who exceeded a collaboratively set GPA threshold and to provide these students with an automatic application fee waiver. Table I reports each institution's direct admissions GPA threshold and the size of their direct admissions class. Each institution worked with the Common App and the research team to identify a GPA threshold that identified, on average, a student who

would easily qualify for admission to their institution. These ranged from a 2.50 to 3.30 GPA on a standard 4.00 scale. Because students' high school GPAs are measured on various scales, we transformed GPAs to standardized proportions by dividing students' self-reported GPA values over their reported GPA scale.⁶ Each institution then identified the number of direct admissions offers and fee waivers they were willing to provide; that is, the number of students they were willing to proactively admit to their institution based on GPA alone by considering the planned size of their freshman class and expected yield rates. These ranged from 2,000 direct admissions offers to an unlimited number restricted only in practice by the number of eligible Common App users in a state.

Equipped with each institution's GPA threshold and number of available direct admissions offers, we internally leveraged the universe of Common App users in each state to identify populations eligible for direct admission. To be included in the available population, students had to be high school seniors; have reported their GPA, zip code or state of residence, and e-mail; had opted-in to receive communications from the Common App; and not be participating in any other Common App experiments or interventions.

For institutions A and B, we identified all students above the respective GPA threshold in each state and randomly sampled twice the size of the available offers for each institution's available population.⁷ Because institutions C1 and C2 had identical GPA thresholds (the equivalent of a 3.00), we first randomly sampled 4,000 students who surpassed the GPA threshold in state C for each institution with replacement to ensure that we could meet each institution's number of offers. Then, because institution C2 was willing to make an unlimited number of direct admissions

⁶ For example, a 3.00 GPA on an unweighted 4.00 scale = 75%, equivalent to a 4.13 on a 5.50 weighted scale.

⁷ For example, institution A was willing to admit 2,000 students via direct admissions, so we randomly sampled 4,000 students in state A who exceeded the GPA threshold to form our sample for institution A.

offers, we captured the remaining number of students in state C who exceeded the GPA threshold—and were not already included in an institutional pool—and assigned them to C2’s available population. For institutions D1 and D2, because each had a different GPA threshold (the equivalent of a 3.30 and 2.50, respectively), we first randomly sampled all students with a 2.50 or equivalent in state D and randomly assigned them to available populations for D1 or D2. From D1’s pool, we then randomly sampled twice their number of available offers from students who also exceeded the 3.30 or equivalent threshold. Given D2’s unlimited number of offers, no additional sampling was required.

As noted, roughly one third of Common App users are first-generation, and 43% are from racially minoritized groups (Common App 2020, 2021). However, the average Common App user is from a relatively affluent community. To ensure the representation of students from low-income backgrounds in our sample, we oversampled this population by first randomly sampling from the population of students identified as low-income in each state before sampling students who do not reside in low-income zip codes.⁸

In all, our random sampling procedure produced six populations of direct admissions eligible students: one per institution. Within each institutional population, we removed students who had already applied to their given institution and randomly assigned remaining students to treatment or control status with equal (0.50) probability. Our sampling and randomization process resulted in an analytic population of 35,473 eligible students across six institutions and four states, with roughly half ($n=17,704$) assigned to treatment. Table A.1 reports balance tests following randomization testing mean differences between treatment and control groups on a host of demographic, socioeconomic, academic, and high school characteristics. All pre-treatment

⁸ Equipped with students’ zip codes, we identified the median family income from the ACS and consider a student from a low-income community if it ranked in the bottom 40% of all zip codes sorted by median family income.

covariates are statistically or substantively balanced between our groups within each randomization pool and in our overall pooled sample (Deaton and Cartwright 2018).

Table II reports weighted descriptive statistics for our pooled sample of 31,481 unique students.^{9,10} Approximately 57% are female, and roughly one quarter (23%) are from underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (URM) groups.¹¹ One quarter (25%) are first-generation and approximately 10-11% are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, identified by either residing in a low-income zip code or being eligible for a Common App fee waiver. Students' GPA and ACT standardized test scores are relatively high: 0.955 GPA proportion (equivalent to a 3.82 GPA on a 4.00 scale) and ACT (or SAT equivalent) of 28. Over 80% of our population had already applied to at least one institution via the Common App at the time of randomization. The vast majority (78%) attend public high schools.

THE INTERVENTION: DIRECT ADMISSIONS

As noted, our partner institutions committed to proactively admit a specified number of eligible, in-state high school students who exceeded their institutionally-set, pre-determined GPA threshold and to provide these students with an automatic application fee waiver. On January 10, 2022, students who were randomly assigned to treatment received a direct admissions letter via e-mail. An example (redacted) letter is included as Figure A.1. This is an official college acceptance letter. Letters were co-branded between the Common App and the respective partner institution

⁹ Given the oversampling of students in low-income zip codes, we weight each observation in our descriptive tables and regression models by the likelihood of sample inclusion such that each w_i is equal to $1 \div (s_p/S)$ for low-income students, where s is share of students from low-income zip codes included in sample s for each institutional experimental pool p and S is the actual population share of students in low-income zip codes in the state; $w_i = 1$ otherwise. This makes the weighted sample share equivalent to the actual population share.

¹⁰ The number of unique students is smaller than the analytic sample since students in state C could be captured in both C1's and C2's experimental pools.

¹¹ URM includes students who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

and featured signatures of the Common App CEO and the institution's Dean of Admissions (or equivalent). The letter provided students with notification that they have been automatically selected for admission to the respective institution. Each letter featured customized information on the institution, including links to the institution's website, institution- and state-specific information on student financial aid (e.g., percent receiving aid, percent graduating without debt), and links to financial aid applications (e.g., the FASFA and relevant state aid programs). Each letter also encouraged students to discuss their college plans with a family member/guardian or other responsible adult (e.g., counselor or teacher), to complete the FASFA, and to explore state or private grants and scholarships (with links if available). If students' Common App profiles included contact information for a parent/guardian or a high school counselor, those trusted adults were also alerted of the students' direct admissions offer via email. Each letter included a link to an official Common App site with further information and an FAQ on the direct admissions program.¹² Before letters were sent, the research team and the Common App engaged with large school districts, boards of education, college advising organizations, and high school counselors in partner states to notify them of the authenticity of the program.

Because students self-report their GPA in their Common App profile, institutions' offers of admission were conditional on students having accurately reported their high school GPA (within reason) and state of residence. Offers were also contingent on the student completing high school and, for public institutions, meeting any state minimum standards for college admission.¹³

¹² The Common App Direct Admissions site is available here: <https://www.commonapp.org/directadmissions>

¹³ Many states have minimum standards for admission to public colleges and universities. For example, students may be required to have completed at least four high school courses in English or one course in a foreign language. See here for a 50-state comparison of common admissions policies: <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-statewide-admissions-policies-2022/> In practice, we are aware of no students in the study who received a direct admission letter but were then deemed ineligible on these grounds, likely due in part to growing alignment between states' high school graduation standards and college admission requirements.

Importantly, letters detailed the steps necessary for a student to “claim their place” in the college. To do so, students need to submit a simplified application through the Common App by using a personalized direct admission code. This removed many supplementary questions, including essays, from the application’s required components. The personalized direct admissions code also served as an automatic fee waiver, allowing students to submit the simplified application for free.

Even though admission was already guaranteed, students still needed to submit a simplified “application.” While students are already admitted to the institution (and no admissions “decision” will be made on the application), at this point in the process, no student information has been shared with partner institutions. Students’ self-report their GPA to the Common App and consented to allow the Common App to contact them as a function of creating a profile. The Common App then provides the student with a direct admissions letter on behalf of the institution. As such, the institution does not know which students have been directly admitted. By submitting a simplified “application” to the college with a direct admissions code, students intentionally and voluntarily consent to release their information to the college and identify themselves as a direct admission student. This protects student privacy.¹⁴ Once a simplified and free application is submitted, institutions may then directly contact each student to complete any admissions steps, verify educational records, and receive a personalized financial aid package—akin to the traditional admissions process.

¹⁴ This process does not violate students’ educational privacy under the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act. No data are ever shared between the Common App and the institution during the direct admissions process. That is, institutions are not provided with students’ names or educational records by the Common App. Institutions only interact with and receive data on students who subsequently choose to “apply” to the institution via the simplified application. This follows the traditional application process, whereby students intentionally and voluntarily release their information to colleges by submitting an application. In the case of direct admissions, the simplified application form reveals that the student was directly admitted under the program. Institutions may then directly contact the student to complete any admissions steps (like submitting final transcripts) and verify educational records. This information on students’ protection of privacy is discussed in each direct admission letter (Figure A.1).

Following the January 10, 2022 launch of the Common App direct admissions pilot, the research team and the Common App conducted surveys and focus groups with subgroups of students included in the pilot along with high school counselors and administrators at partner higher education institutions. While students are not required to enroll in the partner institution following direct admission, students are directed to “submit [their] Common App” to “reserve [their] place at [the college].” We fully observe all application behaviors (within the Common App universe) and enrollment outcomes at any postsecondary institution (via NSC).

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

We estimate the impact of direct admissions on students’ application and enrollment behaviors with exogenous variation induced by our high-fidelity randomization process. Recall, within each state-institution experimental pool, students in our sample were randomly assigned to receive either a direct admissions offer and an automatic fee waiver, or to a business-as-usual condition with equal probability. There is no possibility of assignment manipulation or attrition in our setting. That is, (1) students could not select into or out of treatment or alter their assignment status following randomization and (2) we can observe the full universe of students’ Common App application behaviors and the near universe of enrollment behavior via NSC records. Therefore, we can use ordinary least squares (OLS) to estimate treatment effects by comparing outcomes between treatment and control students with:

$$(1) \quad y_{ip} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_i + \mathbf{X}'_i \Gamma + \phi_p + \varepsilon_{ip} ,$$

where y is the application or enrollment outcome for student i randomized within experimental state-institution pool p .¹⁵ Here, D represents assignment to receive an offer of direct admission (1 for treated students and 0 otherwise), \mathbf{X} represents a vector of student-level covariates described below for robustness, and ϕ are state-by-institution (experimental pool) fixed-effects to restrict all treatment-control comparisons within each experimental group.¹⁶ β_1 is the parameter of interest and measures the causal impact of being randomized to receive a direct admission offer and automatic fee waiver. Equation (1) pools the estimated impact of direct admissions across all p experiments, with each weighted equally.¹⁷ We also estimate and report separate effects for each p state-by-institution experimental pools.

The full set covariates used as controls in \mathbf{X} are high school type, first-generation status, race/ethnicity, gender, GPA proportion, low-income status, fee-waiver eligibility, citizenship, Common App login session count, ACT score and score submission, military status, prior application behavior, and an indicator for multiple treatment (i.e., students in state C who received direct admission offers from both in-state institutions). High school type includes charter, home schooled, independent, public, and religious categories. First-generation is defined as neither parent holding a bachelor's degree or higher. GPA proportion is GPA value over scale (e.g., 3.5/4.0=0.75). Low-income is defined as residing in a zip code in the bottom 40% of all zip codes sorted by median family income. Fee-waiver identifies eligibility for a Common App fee waiver following program rules. Prior application behavior means a student had applied to at least one Common App institution prior to randomization. In the results tables, notes indicate any

¹⁵ For our application outcome, we consider a student to have applied to college if they submitted a Common App by May 1, 2022 for Fall 2022 admission. For our enrollment outcomes, we consider a student enrolled if they are captured in NSC records in the immediate Fall (2022) or following Spring (2023) cohort.

¹⁶ For the few students in state C who qualified for direct admission and were randomized into treatment in both samples ($n=998$, 5.6% of all treated students), \mathbf{X} also includes an indicator of their receipt of two admission offers.

¹⁷ Results are robust to weighting by the size of each state-by-institution experimental pool.

inclusions/exclusions of covariates for particular models. In no instance is a control variable included in a model with an outcome variable that measures the same concept.

Finally, we also explore heterogeneous impacts of direct admissions offers across dimensions of student race/ethnicity (for populations who comprised 5% or more of the total sample), first-generation status, and eligibility for a Common App fee waiver (a proxy for low-income status). Here, we again pool estimates across sites. In all models, we report estimates using robust standard errors clustered at the student-level and include the sampling weights described in footnote 9 to account for the oversampling of students from low-income zip codes.

RESULTS

We first present results on college applications, reflecting whether a student submitted a simplified application following the receipt of direct admissions offer. Then, results on enrollment are considered for both any postsecondary enrollment and enrollment in the specific institution where a direct admissions offer was received. Finally, heterogeneous results are considered by race/ethnicity, first-generation status, and low-income status.

Impacts on College Application Behavior

Table III reports pooled and site-disaggregated estimates of the impacts of our direct admissions intervention on students' college application behaviors. Column 1 captures impacts of direct admissions on students' application to any college; column 2 on their submission of an application to the direct admissions college. Baseline means are reported in brackets.

Overall, we find that, on average, a direct admissions offer alongside an automatic application fee waiver increased the likelihood a student applied to any college by 2.7 percentage points and a 2.8 percentage point increase in the likelihood they applied to their respective direct

admissions college. Given a baseline application rate of 23% overall (after January 10), this is a nearly 12% increase in the likelihood of submitting any college application and a near doubling of the likelihood of application to the direct admissions institution (given a baseline rate of 1.7%). Unconditionally, we observe that 4,465 treated students submitted at least one college application after their direct admissions offer compared to 4,080 applications submitted by students in the control group (Figure I, summing application numbers in parentheses by group across all sites). Similarly, 308 control students submitted an application to one of our partner institutions following randomization compared to 829 applications submitted by students in our treatment group. These point to meaningful increases in the number of college application submissions following the intervention.

While informative, these pooled impacts mask important variation in effects across states and institutions. Our estimates shown in the lower panel of Table III point to positive and significant impacts of direct admissions among treated students in each experimental state-institution pool. Column 2 shows that a direct admissions offer and automatic fee waiver increased the likelihood students applied to the direct admissions institution by between 1.1 points for students in pool C1 to nearly 6.1 points for students in D1. Direct admissions' impact on applying to any college is less consistent by site. While we still observe overall increases for students across most experimental pools (e.g., 5.0 points for students in pool B and 4.8 points for students in pool D1), we do not observe significantly improved application rates among students in pools A and C1 as shown in column 1.

Figure I graphically represents these differences across sites. Overall, treatment effects for applying to a specific direct admissions institution are relatively consistent (1-2 points) for students directly admitted to institutions A, C1, C2, and D2. However, impacts for students admitted to

institutions B and D1 were on the magnitude of 5-6 points. Descriptively, we observe that these institutions are both public and are among the largest (by undergraduate headcount) in our sample, have low-to-median net prices, and have the highest six-year graduation rates (i.e., higher quality; Table I). Descriptively, institutions A, C1, C2, and D2 each received roughly 20-100 more applications from directly admitted students than control peers whereas institutions B and D1 each received 125-180 more applications each (Figure I).

Impacts on College Enrollment

Table III also reports pooled and site-disaggregated estimates of the impacts of direct admissions on any college enrollment (column 3) and on enrollment in the direct admissions institution (column 4), as well as impacts disaggregated by site (lower panel). Here, we show precise null impacts on students' postsecondary enrollments. Our estimates can rule out increases as small as 0.30-1.08 percentage points in the pooled sample and show no meaningful heterogeneity across states or institutions. The only significant estimate is a practically meaningless 0.17-percentage point increase in the likelihood of enrollment at the direct admissions institutions for students in pool D2. Figure II graphically depicts these enrollment rates and again shows no clear unconditional mean differences between treatment and control groups.

Heterogeneity by Race/Ethnicity, First-Generation Status, and Fee Waiver Eligibility

As expected, while we observe positive and meaningful impacts of direct admissions on application behaviors of applying to any college or the direct admissions institution for our pooled sample of 2.7-2.8 percentage points, respectively, impacts were consistently higher among racially minoritized, first-generation, and low-income students. As shown in Table IV, Black/African American students were 3.7 points more likely to apply to college following direct admissions and were 6.1 points more likely to apply to the direct admissions institution. Given a baseline overall

application rate of 31.1%, this is an increase of nearly 12% in application submission for Black/African American students. Similarly, students with Two or More Races were 4.9 points (or 19.2%) more likely to apply overall and 2.8 points more likely to apply to their direct admissions college. Latinx students were also 2.9 points more likely to apply to the direct admissions college.

Similarly, students who would be the first in their family to attain a bachelor's degree or higher were 3.2 points (or 12.8%) more likely to apply to any college and 4.1 points more likely to apply to the direct admissions institution, and those who were eligible for a Common App fee waiver were 2.9 points (or 8.8%) more likely to apply to any college and 5.2 points more likely to apply to the institution where they were offered direct admission.

These differences are also shown in Figure III (comparing the sum of applications submitted by treatment versus control students within each group) suggest that the direct admissions intervention was associated with 92 more college applications among underrepresented minority students (pooled across sites), 147 more college applications among first-generation students, and 74 more college applications among students eligible for a fee waiver.

We again do not observe any causal or descriptive impacts on college enrollment when disaggregating by race/ethnicity, first-generation status, or fee waiver eligibility in Table IV or Figure IV. The one exception is that we again detect a statistically significant but practically meaningless increase (0.93 percentage points) in the likelihood that a fee-waiver eligible student enrolls in the direct admissions college following treatment.

CONCLUSION

Administrative burdens in the college application process disadvantage students from racially minoritized and socioeconomically underprivileged backgrounds. This can lead many

students to abandon postsecondary plans altogether or apply to institutions of lower academic quality or with fewer resources, reducing their likelihood of subsequent completion and future economic prosperity (Hoekstra 2009; Dillon and Smith 2017; Andrews, Imberman, and Lovenheim 2020). Rather than leaving students to rely on uneven levels of social and cultural capital to navigate a “gauntlet” of various deadlines and administrative hurdles when applying to college (Klasik 2012), an emerging strategy is to functionally eliminate the need to apply to college and instead *proactively* admit qualified high school students using existing data, which contains their GPA and/or standardized test scores. These “direct admissions” systems combine multiple interventions to reduce administrative burdens by providing proactive and early information, a guarantee of admissions, simplification of the college application itself, and automatic fee waivers.

Despite the operation of direct admissions practices across multiple states and hundreds of independent postsecondary institutions, little research has been done to examine their impact on students’ application and enrollment behaviors. Leveraging a large-scale, multi-state experiment with the Common App and six public and private universities, this work presents the first causal impacts of direct admissions on student outcomes. We find that students who are proactively informed of their guaranteed admission—and offered automatic application fee waivers alongside a simplified application form—are approximately 2.7 percentage points (or 12%) more likely to subsequently submit a college application overall and are nearly twice as likely to apply to the institution where they were offered direct admission, signaling their intent to “claim their place” and enroll. These impacts are higher for racially minoritized (3-6 points), first-generation (4 points), and low-income (5 points) students. We also find that students are more responsive to direct admissions offers when they are proactively admitted to larger, higher quality institutions defined by having larger undergraduate student bodies and higher graduation rates. We do not,

however, observe any impacts on students' subsequent enrollment behaviors. In all, we experimentally show that this low-cost, low-touch intervention can be effective at equitably increasing college application rates—particularly among marginalized student groups—but is insufficient alone to improve postsecondary enrollment rates given other barriers to enrollment such as affordability.

The impacts we observe are meaningfully *larger* than those in prior works that test the individual or combined impact of low-touch informational interventions, nudges, and/or fee waivers (Bergman, Denning, and Manoli 2019; Hyman 2020; Gurantz et al. 2021) but are also meaningfully *smaller* than those that additionally simplify the financial aid application process, incorporate a financial aid award, or provide sustained, higher-touch supports (Bettinger et al. 2012; Oreopoulos and Ford 2019; Dynarski et al. 2021; Burland et al. 2023). Indeed emerging literature argues that that when compared to low-cost, light-touch nudges, high-touch personal assistance like coaching or mentoring is preferred for long-term behavioral change (Carrell and Sacerdote 2017; Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2018; Oreopoulos 2020; Oreopoulos et al., 2022; Gallego et al. 2023; Holzman et al., 2023). Being situated between these bodies of work yields two important insights. First, low-touch, informational interventions and automatic application fee waivers can effectively increase application rates if combined with other strategies like a *proactive admissions guarantee* and a *simplified* application process, particularly among racially minoritized, first-generation, and low-income students. The unique ability of direct admissions to yield positive or stronger impacts beyond similar interventions (e.g., fee waivers, low-touch nudges, or informational campaigns) appears to stem from both the guarantee and proactive nature of the notification. Proactively informing students that their prior academic performance has already earned them a college acceptance “flips the script” for many students who do not believe

they can succeed in college or that college options exist for them. No longer do students first need to guess if they will be admitted to an institution. Direct admissions not only proactively alters the process of acceptance during a critical point in a high school student's senior year but also structurally simplifies the steps students must take to subsequently enroll in college.

Second, the combination of interventions in direct admissions as implemented here is not sufficient to yield positive impacts on college enrollment. Increasing students' applications to college is in itself a worthy and positive outcome. Often an application triggers exposure to postsecondary institutions and allows students to receive enrollment support in addition to tailored information on college options, majors, and financial aid. However, direct admissions is not enough on its own here to alter enrollment behavior and we posit that affordability constraints are a large remaining barrier to enrollment. Prior research has shown that affordability constraints represent a substantial and growing barrier to college access (Dynarski, Page, and Scott-Clayton 2022), and direct admissions is not a replacement for financial aid. Work by Dynarski et al. (2021) found that an early, guaranteed, and unconditional financial aid award of free tuition—*conditional on college acceptance*—alongside targeted information and coupons for application fee waivers produced large impacts on students' application and enrollment outcomes. When compared to direct admissions, this is a more expensive approach to altering enrollment outcomes given the institutional costs of a free tuition guarantee for students. We show that *guaranteeing admission* rather than *guaranteeing aid conditional on admission* in a lower-cost strategy can still yield positive, but not equivalent effects.

Our findings are important for the ongoing design and diffusion of proactive college admissions policies and future studies. Our results emphasize the need to carefully design college access policies that reduce administrative burdens, provide early proactive notification, guarantee

admission, and provide automatic fee waivers. Our findings are consistent with prior literature that shows that even relatively minor changes in policy and practice can have meaningful impacts on students' college outcomes by reducing administrative burdens, decreasing complexity, specifying and clarifying student options, clearly communicating GPA standards, and reducing time and financial costs (Hoxby and Turner 2013; Marx and Turner 2019; Dynarski et al. 2021; Burland et al. 2023; Gallego et al, 2023; Shi 2026).

While presenting the impacts of direct admissions programs is important and reflects the current landscape of direct admissions systems that singularly address the admissions process, a next step in our scholarship is to test the combined effect of a proactive, early, guaranteed admissions offer with an automatic fee waiver that includes proactive, early, and guaranteed student financial aid. Through research currently underway, our new work will explore the gap in the literature between policies that *guarantee admission* and those that *guarantee aid conditional on admission*. By experimentally testing the impact of incorporating student aid awards embedded in direct admissions notifications, we seek to tease out the individual and combined effects of these strategies. Additional future research should explore the costs and effectiveness of the integration of more sustained, higher touch supports such as personalized advising, admissions and financial aid navigators, and wrap around support services (Gallego et al. 2023).

Our work experimentally shows that a novel low-cost, low-touch intervention can be effective in changing important college-going behaviors but that it is insufficient alone to impact enrollment. Overall our evidence shows that direct admissions systems are effective in altering college application behavior in a way that is equity enhancing for low-income, first generation, and minority students.

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TABLE I
Directory information for pilot institutions.

	Direct Admit GPA Threshold	Direct Admit Offers	Sector	Designations	Undergraduate Headcount	Admit Rate	Average Net Price	Percent Pell	Graduation Rate
State/Institution A	2.80 (70.0%)	1,998	Public	HBCU, R2	1,800	80%	\$12,900	55%	40%
State/Institution B	2.80 (70.0%)	2,991	Public	HSI, R2	16,100	90%	\$12,000	80%	70%
State C - Institution 1	3.00 (75.0%)	1,995	Private-NP	HBCU, BA	900	60%	\$25,600	55%	50%
State C - Institution 2	3.00 (75.0%)	4,744	Public	R2	18,600	70%	\$12,600	40%	50%
State D - Institution 1	3.30 (82.5%)	1,989	Public	R1	26,900	90%	\$18,800	30%	70%
State D - Institution 2	2.50 (62.5%)	3,987	Private-NP	HSI, R3	2,200	85%	\$26,700	30%	60%

Source: Common App; College Navigator, U.S. Department of Education; and Center for Minority Serving Institutions, Rutgers University.

Note: Table reports directory information for pilot sites as of spring 2023. All institutions are 4-year. Direct admissions GPA threshold identifies lower bound of students eligible for direct admission to the institution (population eligible for randomization) on a standard 4.0 scale. We also include in parentheses the GPA measure used in our analysis. This is an equivalent proportion of GPA (value over scale) identified in parentheses since not all schools use a 4.0 GPA scale, this measure standardizes GPAs across different scales (e.g., 3.00 GPA on 4.00 scale = $3.00/4.00 = 0.750 = 75.0\%$). Direct admit offers are actual number of acceptances made through direct admissions pilot. NP = Not-for-profit. HBCU = Historically Black College or University. HSI = Hispanic Serving Institution. R1 = Doctoral University/Very High Research Activity, R2 = Doctoral University/High Research Activity, R3 = Doctoral University, BA = Baccalaureate College. Undergraduate headcount and acceptance rate are Fall 2021. Net price and percent Pell are 2020-21. Graduation rate is six-year, bachelor's degree attainment for 2013 cohort. Headcount and net price are rounded to nearest 100; acceptance rate, Pell, and graduation rate to nearest 5.

TABLE II
Descriptive statistics, pooled sample.

		Mean	S.D.
Treatment/Outcomes.	Direct Admitted (Treatment)	49.7%	50.0%
	Applied to Any College	24.9%	43.3%
	Applied to Direct Admissions College	3.0%	17.0%
	Enrolled in Any College	85.8%	34.9%
	Enrolled in Direct Admissions College	1.0%	10.0%
Demographics	Am. Indian/AK Native	0.2%	3.9%
	Asian	10.0%	30.0%
	Black/African American	12.9%	33.5%
	Latinx	10.1%	30.2%
	Nat. Hawaiian/Other Pac. Island.	0.0%	2.9%
	Nonresident	0.8%	9.0%
	Two or More Races	5.4%	22.6%
	White	56.6%	49.6%
	Underrepresented Minority (URM)	23.2%	42.2%
	Intl. Student or Undocumented	0.8%	9.0%
	Female	56.5%	49.6%
Male	42.4%	49.4%	
	Active Military or Veteran	0.3%	5.6%
Socioeconomic Contexts	First-Generation	25.1%	43.4%
	Low-Income	9.9%	29.9%
	Common App Fee-Waiver Receipt	11.1%	31.5%
Academic Performance	GPA Proportion	95.5%	13.5%
	ACT (SAT Equivalent)	27.83	3.75
Application Behavior	Prior Applicant	81.8%	38.6%
	Common App Login Sessions	47.20	55.04
High School Context	Charter	1.0%	10.1%
	Homeschooled	0.7%	8.1%
	Independent	8.8%	28.4%
	Public	78.3%	41.2%
	Religious	10.1%	30.2%
State/Institution (Site)	State/Institution A	12.5%	33.1%
	State/Institution B	16.5%	37.1%
	State C Pooled	30.7%	46.1%
	State C - Institution 1	10.0%	30.0%
	State C - Institution 2	20.7%	40.5%
	State D Pooled	40.4%	49.1%
	State D - Institution 1	12.7%	33.3%
	State D - Institution 2	27.7%	44.7%

Notes: Table reports descriptive statistics for 31,481 unique students pooled across sites and weighted for over-sampling in low-income zip codes. URM includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. First-generation is defined as neither parent holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Low-income is defined as residing in a zip code in the bottom 40% of all zip codes sorted by median family income. Fee-waiver identifies eligibility for a Common App fee waiver following [program rules](#). GPA proportion is GPA value over scale (e.g., 3.5/4.0=75.0%). Prior applicant means a student had applied to at least one Common App institution prior to randomization. Figures rounded and unknown categories omitted.

TABLE III
Impacts of direct admission on college application and enrollment behavior, pooled and heterogeneity by site.

	Applied to Any College	Applied to Direct Admissions College	Enrolled in Any College	Enrolled in Direct Admissions College
Pooled N=35,473	0.0269*** (0.0047) [0.2296]	0.0283*** (0.0019) [0.0173]	0.0031 (0.0038) [0.8441]	0.0006 (0.0013) [0.0115]
State/Institution (Site)				
A n=3,996	0.0136 (0.0145) [0.2510]	0.0173*** (0.0045) [0.0140]	0.0084 (0.0126) [0.8070]	0.0000 † (0.0000) [0.0000]
B n=5,993	0.0502*** (0.0131) [0.3100]	0.0525*** (0.0053) [0.0256]	0.0026 (0.0121) [0.7380]	0.0005 (0.0024) [0.0120]
C1 n=3,998	-0.0229 (0.0144) [0.1460]	0.0111* (0.0045) [0.0050]	0.0100 (0.0135) [0.8480]	0.0012 (0.0008) [0.0000]
C2 n=9,511	0.0235** (0.0079) [0.1400]	0.0227*** (0.0034) [0.0122]	0.0021 (0.0069) [0.8810]	-0.0026 (0.0035) [0.0279]
D1 n=3,978	0.0479** (0.0150) [0.2720]	0.0605*** (0.0096) [0.0583]	-0.0076 (0.0095) [0.8960]	0.0050 (0.0049) [0.0166]
D2 n=7,997	0.0235* (0.0103) [0.2850]	0.0140*** (0.0025) [0.0047]	0.0041 (0.0071) [0.8710]	0.0017* (0.0008) [0.0005]

Notes: + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † zero students in the sample enrolled in this institution. This table reports coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses) clustered at the student level. Each cell is a separate model estimating impacts of a direct admissions offer on application or enrollment behavior (by column). Outcomes are application to or enrollment in an institution following a direct admission offer: any college (columns 1 and 3) versus target institution (columns 2 and 4). Control group means are reported in brackets. Pooled models include institution-by-state (site) fixed effects. All models include sampling weights and full covariate controls: high school type, first-generation status, race/ethnicity, gender, GPA proportion, fee-waiver eligibility, low-income status, citizenship, login sessions, ACT score and score submission, military status, prior application behavior, and an indicator for multiple treatment (i.e., students in state C who received direct admission offers from both in-state institutions). Figures are rounded.

TABLE IV
Impacts of direct admission on college application and enrollment behavior, heterogeneity by subgroup.

		Applied to Any College	Applied to Direct Admissions College	Enrolled in Any College	Enrolled in Direct Admissions College
Race/Ethnicity					
	Asian	0.0241 (0.0170) [0.2950]	0.0221** (0.0070) [0.0294]	0.0102 (0.0134) [0.8210]	-0.0018 (0.0047) [0.0188]
	Black/African American	0.0365** (0.0133) [0.3110]	0.0607*** (0.0065) [0.0266]	0.0129 (0.0114) [0.7780]	0.0033 (0.0039) [0.0126]
	Latinx	0.0192 (0.0153) [0.2940]	0.0288*** (0.0070) [0.0360]	-0.0049 (0.0126) [0.7950]	-0.0010 (0.0043) [0.0180]
	Two or More Races	0.0491* (0.0214) [0.2560]	0.0277** (0.0090) [0.0243]	-0.0154 (0.01453) [0.8780]	0.0032 (0.0053) [0.0088]
	White	0.0238*** (0.0059) [0.1790]	0.0216*** (0.0021) [0.0082]	0.0047 (0.0046) [0.8840]	0.0001 (0.0015) [0.0085]
First-Generation					
	First-Gen	0.0323*** (0.0089) [0.2530]	0.0408*** (0.0043) [0.0276]	0.0065 (0.0079) [0.7830]	0.0033 (0.0031) [0.0170]
	Not First-Gen	0.0250*** (0.0055) [0.2190]	0.0238*** (0.0021) [0.0128]	0.0020 (0.0042) [0.8710]	-0.0004 (0.0013) [0.0090]
Fee Waiver					
	Fee Waiver	0.0293* (0.0147) [0.3340]	0.0523*** (0.0071) [0.0336]	0.0150 (0.0113) [0.8080]	0.0093* (0.0043) [0.0116]
	No Fee Waiver	0.0266*** (0.0050) [0.2120]	0.0252*** (0.0020) [0.0146]	0.0016 (0.0040) [0.8500]	-0.0005 (0.0013) [0.0115]

Notes: + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $N=35,473$. This table reports coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses) clustered at the student level. Each cell is a separate model estimating impacts of a direct admissions offer on application or enrollment behavior (by column). Outcomes are application to or enrollment in an institution following a direct admission offer: any college (columns 1 and 3) versus target institution (columns 2 and 4). Control group means are reported in brackets. Each model is pooled (including site fixed effects) and is estimated by fully interacting the direct admissions treatment indicator with the respective subgroup indicator. All models include sampling weights and full covariate controls: high school type, first-generation status, race/ethnicity, gender, GPA proportion, fee-waiver eligibility, low-income status, citizenship, login sessions, ACT score and score submission, military status, prior application behavior, and an indicator for multiple treatment (i.e., students in state C who received direct admission offers from both in-state institutions). Models by race/ethnicity are estimated for subgroups representing $\geq 5\%$ of the total study population. First-generation is defined as neither parent holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Fee-waiver identifies eligibility for a Common App fee waiver following [program rules](#). Figures are rounded.

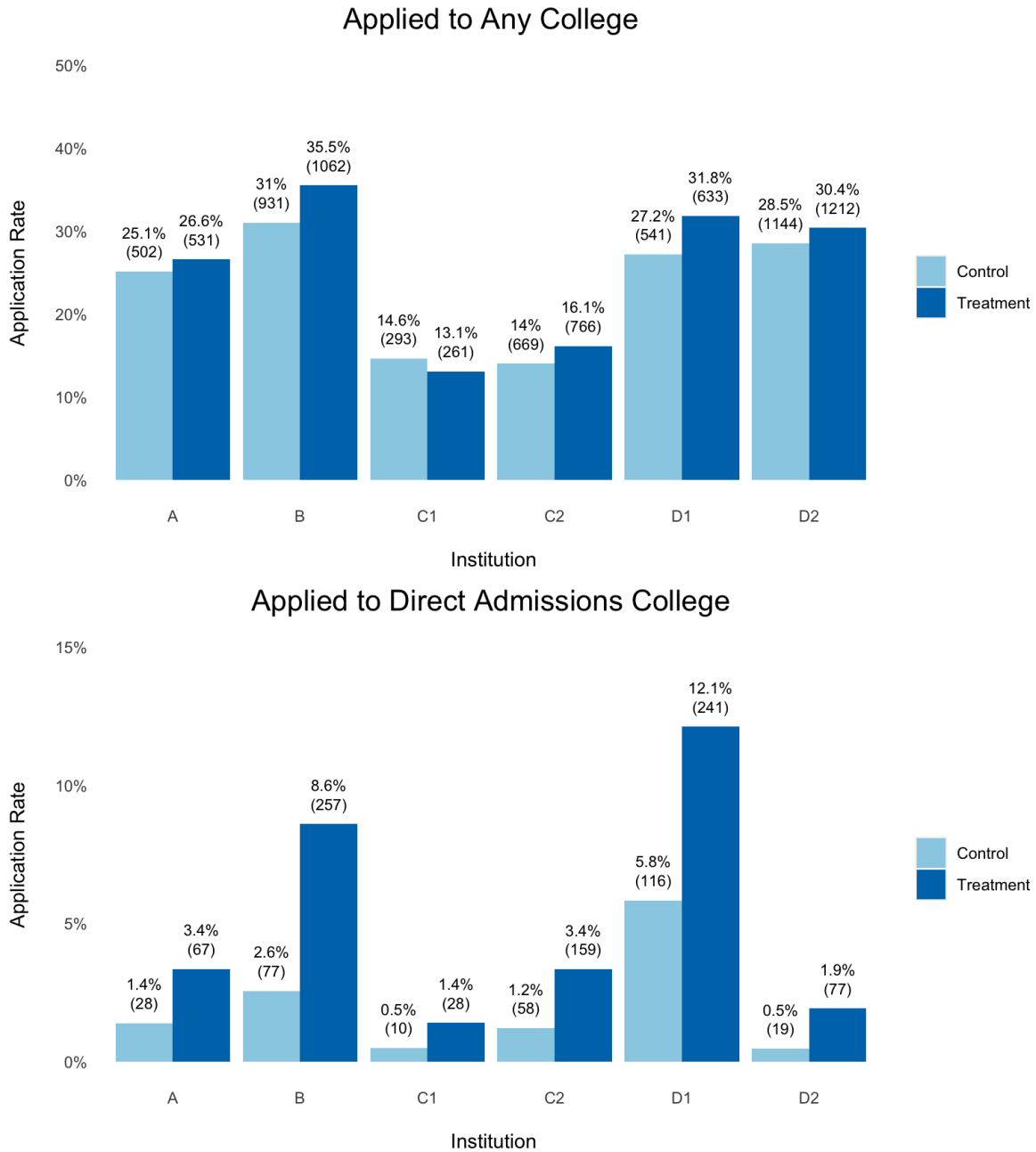


FIGURE I
Application rates and counts for treatment and control group, by site.

Figure plots unconditional college application rates for treatment and control students by site (state/institution). Raw number of applications submitted reported in parentheses. Outcome is application to an institution following a direct admission offer: any college application (first row) versus application to the target institution (second row). Summing application numbers by group across all sites in the top panel shows that 4,465 treated students submitted at least one college application after their direct admissions offer compared to 4,080 applications submitted by students in the control group. 308 control students submitted an application to one of our partner institutions following randomization compared to 829 applications submitted by students in our treatment group.

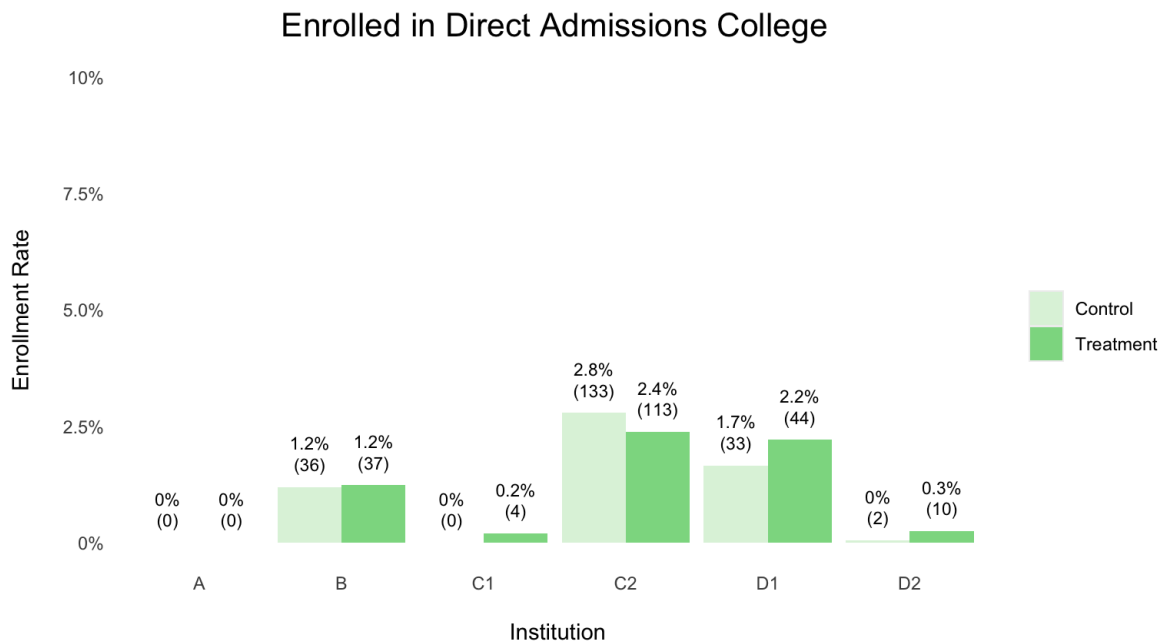
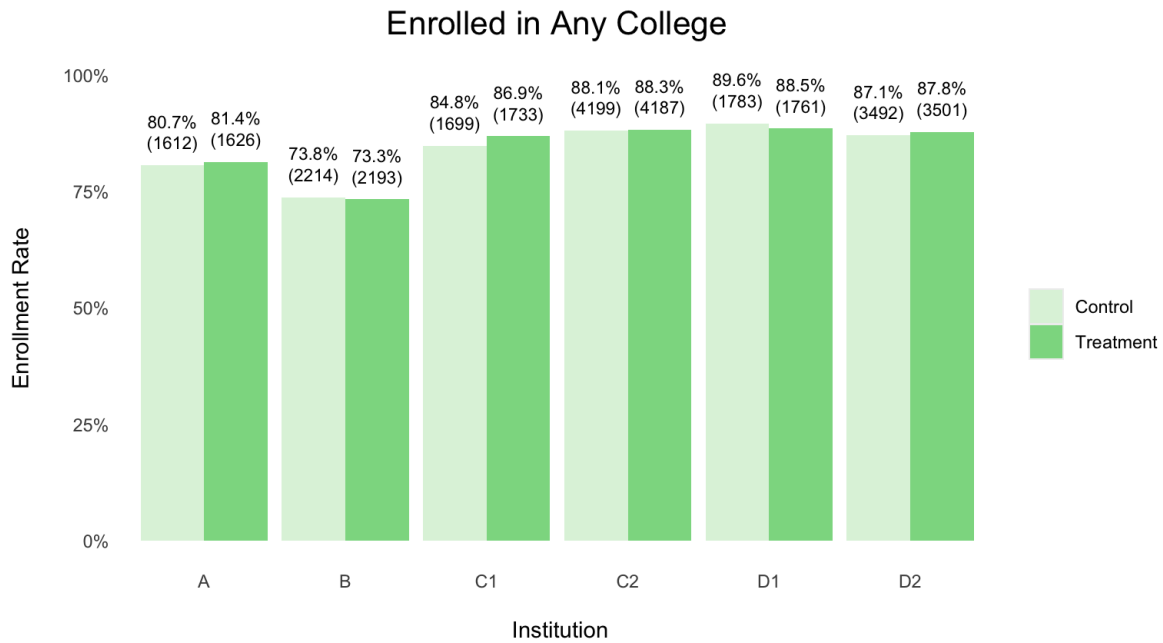
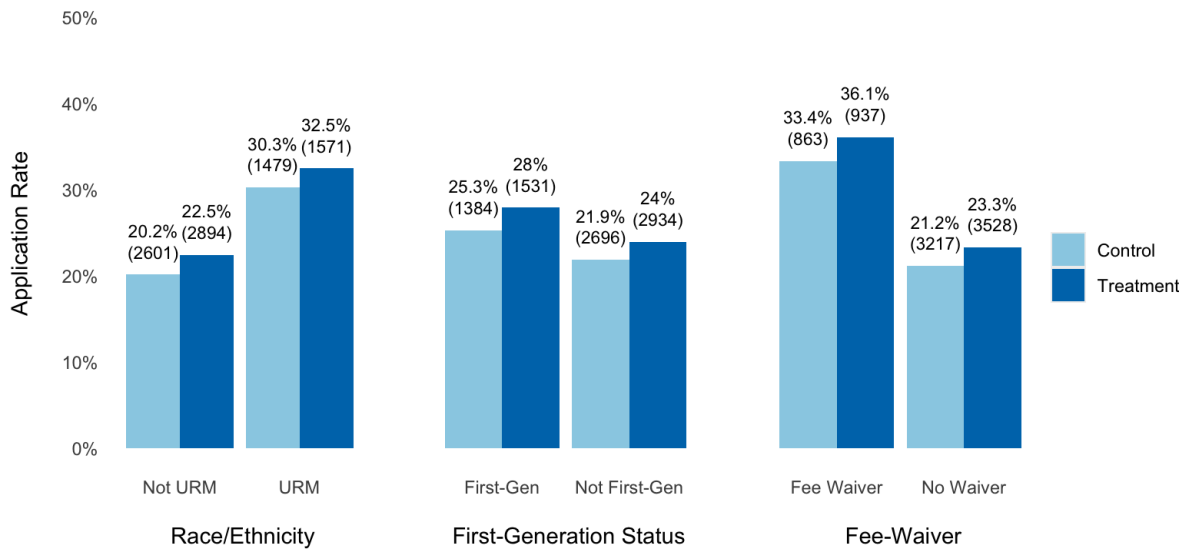


FIGURE II
Enrollment rates and counts for treatment and control group, by site.

Figure plots unconditional college enrollment rates for treatment and control students by site (state/institution). Raw number of enrollees reported in parentheses. Outcome is enrollment in an institution in the subsequent fall or spring following a spring direct admission offer: any college enrollment (first row) versus enrollment in the target institution (second row).

Applied to Any College



Applied to Direct Admissions College

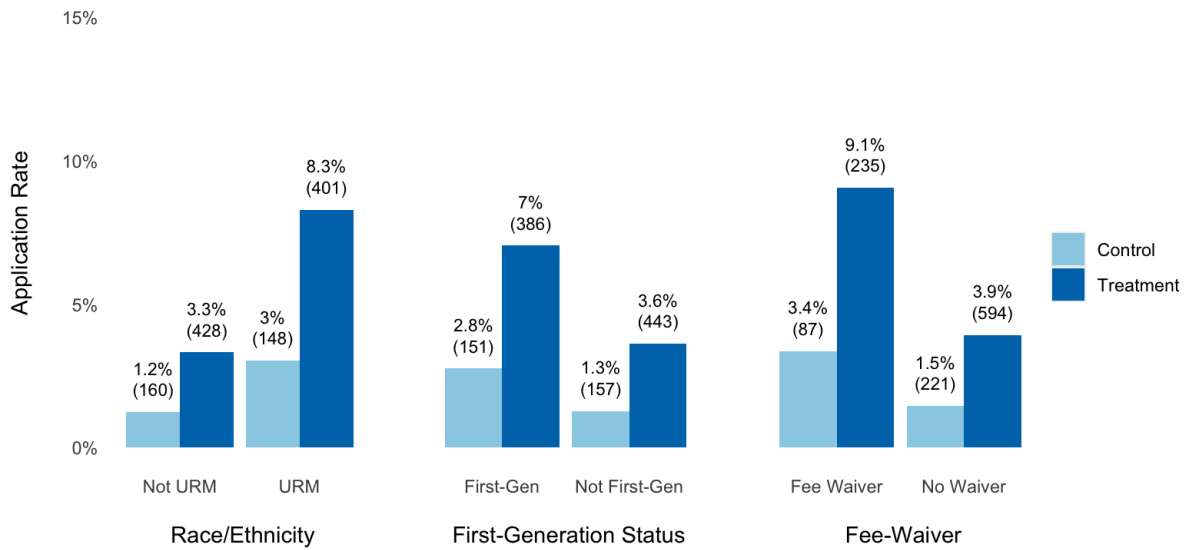


FIGURE III

Application rates and counts for treatment and control group, by race/ethnicity, first-generation status, and fee-waiver receipt.

Figure plots unconditional college application rates for treatment and control students by subgroup pooled across sites. Raw number of applications submitted reported in parentheses. Outcome is application to an institution following a direct admission offer: any college application (first row) versus application to the target institution (second row). URM includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. First-generation is defined as neither parent holding a bachelor’s degree or higher. Fee-waiver identifies eligibility for a Common App fee waiver following [program rules](#). In the top panel, comparing applications between treatment and control students within groups shows 92 more applications were submitted by treated URM students, 147 more by treated first-generation students, and 74 more by treated students eligible for a fee waiver.

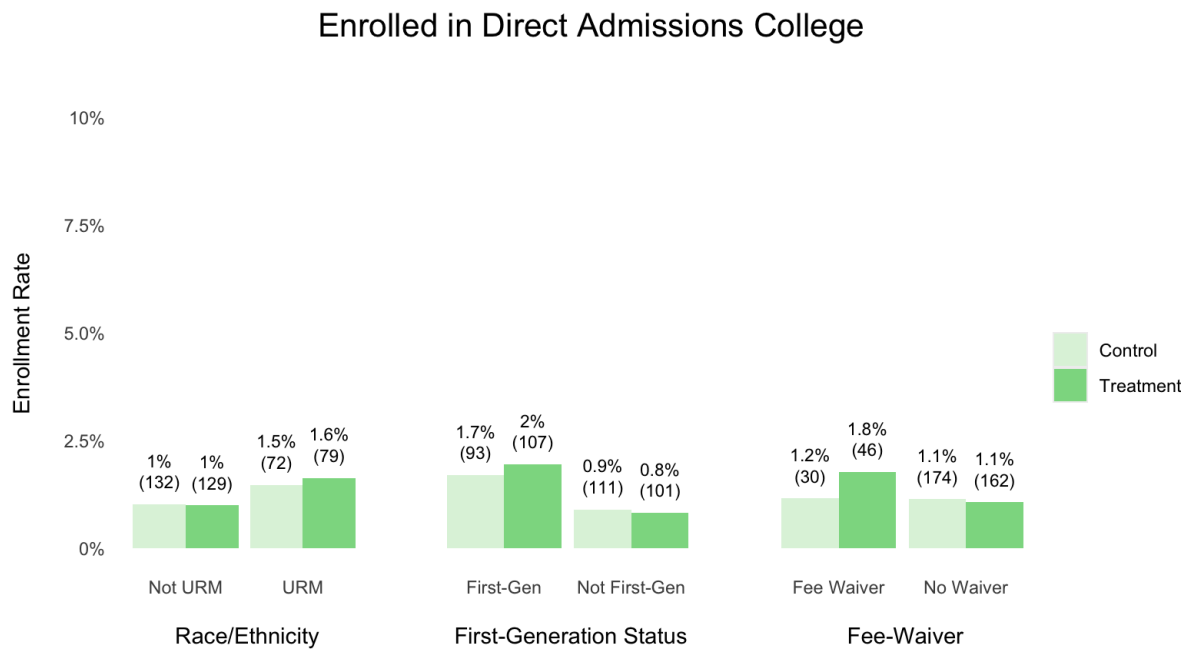
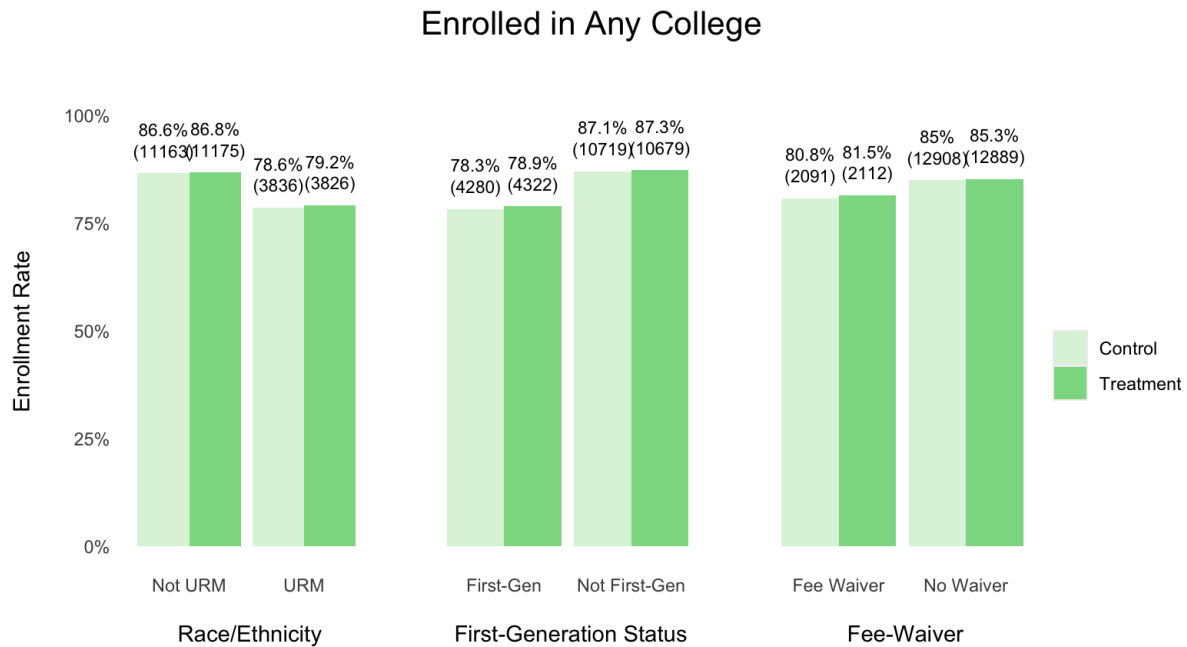


FIGURE IV
Enrollment rates and counts for treatment and control group, by race/ethnicity, first-generation status, and fee-waiver receipt.

Figure plots unconditional college enrollment rates for treatment and control students by subgroup pooled across sites. Raw number of enrollees reported in parentheses. Outcome is enrollment in an institution in the subsequent fall or spring following a spring direct admission offer: any college enrollment (first row) versus enrollment in the target institution (second row). URM includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. First-generation is defined as neither parent holding a bachelor’s degree or higher. Fee-waiver identifies eligibility for a Common App fee waiver following [program rules](#).

ONLINE APPENDIX

TABLE A.1
Randomization balance, pooled and by site.


	Pooled			State/Institution A			State/Institution B			State C - Institution 1		
	Control	Treat	<i>p</i>	Control	Treat	<i>p</i>	Control	Treat	<i>p</i>	Control	Treat	<i>p</i>
Am. Indian/AK Native	0.00	0.00	0.615	0.00	0.00	1.000	0.00	0.00	0.702	0.00	0.00	0.368
Asian	0.09	0.08	0.049*	0.09	0.10	0.589	0.13	0.13	0.503	0.05	0.05	0.638
Black/African American	0.16	0.16	0.724	0.29	0.27	0.170	0.13	0.14	0.094	0.18	0.18	0.637
Latinx	0.12	0.11	0.362	0.10	0.10	0.713	0.26	0.24	0.113	0.09	0.07	0.029*
Nat. Hawaiian/Other Pac. Island.	0.00	0.00	0.236	0.00	0.00	0.564	0.00	0.00	0.157	0.00	0.00	0.317
Nonresident	0.01	0.01	0.020*	0.01	0.01	0.328	0.01	0.01	0.019*	0.01	0.01	0.437
Two or More Races	0.05	0.05	0.936	0.06	0.06	1.000	0.03	0.03	0.636	0.05	0.04	0.663
White	0.54	0.54	0.267	0.42	0.43	0.565	0.39	0.39	0.973	0.58	0.60	0.142
Underrepresented Minority (URM)	0.27	0.27	0.737	0.39	0.38	0.313	0.39	0.39	0.880	0.27	0.26	0.301
Intl. Student or Undocumented	0.01	0.01	0.020*	0.01	0.01	0.328	0.01	0.01	0.019*	0.01	0.01	0.437
Female	0.58	0.57	0.248	0.56	0.59	0.055	0.55	0.54	0.312	0.59	0.59	0.981
Male	0.41	0.41	0.175	0.44	0.41	0.051	0.44	0.45	0.393	0.38	0.38	0.999
Active Military or Veteran	0.00	0.00	0.722	0.00	0.00	1.000	0.00	0.00	0.523	0.00	0.00	0.409
First-Generation	0.31	0.31	0.721	0.32	0.31	0.563	0.39	0.39	0.796	0.37	0.37	0.948
Low-Income	0.27	0.28	0.064	0.20	0.21	0.408	0.34	0.33	0.736	0.57	0.60	0.080
Common App Fee-Waiver Receipt	0.15	0.15	0.828	0.23	0.22	0.407	0.22	0.22	0.504	0.12	0.13	0.416
GPA Proportion	0.95	0.95	0.396	0.93	0.95	0.006**	0.95	0.95	0.742	0.95	0.96	0.282
ACT (SAT Equivalent)	27.58	27.57	0.896	27.42	27.50	0.490	27.59	27.56	0.789	27.27	27.13	0.305
Previously Applied to College	0.79	0.78	0.718	0.86	0.84	0.153	0.80	0.81	0.452	0.68	0.67	0.286
Common App Login Session Count	42.76	43.36	0.280	51.76	51.33	0.808	42.19	42.25	0.965	33.44	32.50	0.501
Charter	0.02	0.02	0.083	0.01	0.01	1.000	0.04	0.04	0.808	0.05	0.04	0.236
Homeschooled	0.01	0.01	0.064	0.00	0.01	0.006**	0.00	0.00	0.366	0.01	0.01	0.739
Independent	0.09	0.09	0.890	0.07	0.05	0.112	0.03	0.04	0.707	0.12	0.12	0.701
Public	0.77	0.77	0.927	0.77	0.77	0.548	0.81	0.80	0.410	0.70	0.71	0.737
Religious	0.10	0.10	0.896	0.15	0.14	0.787	0.09	0.10	0.236	0.09	0.09	0.900
<i>n</i>	17,769	17,704	-	1,998	1,998	-	3,002	2,991	-	2,003	1,995	-
<i>F</i> (<i>p</i>)	1.349 (0.114)			1.158 (0.267)			0.721 (0.841)			1.065 (0.376)		

Notes: + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $N=35,473$. Table reports unconditional means for randomized treatment and control groups on background characteristics and p -value on t -test for mean differences. F statistic is for test of joint significance. URM includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. First-generation is defined as neither parent holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Low-income is defined as residing in a zip code in the bottom 40% of all zip codes sorted by median family income. Fee-waiver identifies eligibility for a Common App fee waiver following [program rules](#). GPA proportion is GPA value over scale (e.g., 3.5/4.0=0.75). Previously applied to college means a student had applied to at least one Common App institution prior to randomization. Figures rounded and unknown categories omitted.

TABLE A.1 (CONT.)
Randomization balance, pooled and by site.

	State C - Institution 2			State D - Institution 1			State D - Institution 2		
	Control	Treat	<i>p</i>	Control	Treat	<i>p</i>	Control	Treat	<i>p</i>
Am. Indian/AK Native	0.00	0.00	0.844	0.00	0.00	0.564	0.00	0.00	0.533
Asian	0.07	0.06	0.035*	0.10	0.09	0.086	0.09	0.08	0.778
Black/African American	0.13	0.13	0.541	0.12	0.14	0.188	0.15	0.14	0.189
Latinx	0.07	0.07	0.590	0.09	0.09	0.782	0.09	0.10	0.669
Nat. Hawaiian/Other Pac. Island.	0.00	0.00	0.316	0.00	0.00	0.564	0.00	0.00	0.773
Nonresident	0.01	0.01	0.146	0.01	0.01	0.611	0.01	0.01	0.600
Two or More Races	0.04	0.05	0.293	0.06	0.06	0.793	0.07	0.07	0.947
White	0.64	0.63	0.664	0.57	0.57	0.848	0.55	0.57	0.132
Underrepresented Minority (URM)	0.20	0.21	0.378	0.21	0.23	0.208	0.25	0.24	0.414
Intl. Student or Undocumented	0.01	0.01	0.146	0.01	0.01	0.611	0.01	0.01	0.600
Female	0.59	0.58	0.208	0.59	0.59	0.974	0.57	0.56	0.114
Male	0.38	0.40	0.110	0.40	0.40	0.923	0.42	0.43	0.091
Active Military or Veteran	0.00	0.00	0.991	0.00	0.00	0.165	0.01	0.01	0.748
First-Generation	0.28	0.29	0.119	0.25	0.26	0.536	0.28	0.27	0.454
Low-Income	0.24	0.25	0.227	0.24	0.25	0.482	0.17	0.17	0.496
Common App Fee-Waiver Receipt	0.08	0.08	0.914	0.14	0.15	0.531	0.13	0.13	0.510
GPA Proportion	0.96	0.96	0.730	0.99	0.98	0.003**	0.93	0.93	0.889
ACT (SAT Equivalent)	27.77	27.72	0.591	27.98	27.73	0.025*	27.39	27.59	0.009**
Previously Applied to College	0.74	0.73	0.365	0.84	0.86	0.128	0.81	0.82	0.630
Common App Login Session Count	38.04	39.09	0.300	51.88	51.40	0.802	44.44	46.70	0.056
Charter	0.03	0.03	0.106	0.00	0.00	0.317	0.00	0.00	0.700
Homeschooled	0.01	0.01	0.543	0.01	0.01	0.723	0.01	0.01	0.457
Independent	0.15	0.16	0.076	0.07	0.05	0.021*	0.06	0.05	0.224
Public	0.67	0.67	0.592	0.85	0.87	0.079	0.86	0.86	0.816
Religious	0.12	0.12	0.460	0.06	0.06	1.000	0.07	0.07	0.605
n	4,767	4,744	-	1,989	1,989	-	4,010	3,987	-
<i>F</i> (<i>p</i>)	1.249 (0.183)			1.540 (0.042*)			1.286 (0.154)		

Notes: + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $N=35,473$. Table reports unconditional means for randomized treatment and control groups on background characteristics and p -value on t -test for mean differences. F statistic is for test of joint significance. URM includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. First-generation is defined as neither parent holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Low-income is defined as residing in a zip code in the bottom 40% of all zip codes sorted by median family income. Fee-waiver identifies eligibility for a Common App fee waiver following [program rules](#). GPA proportion is GPA value over scale (e.g., $3.5/4.0=0.75$). Previously applied to college means a student had applied to at least one Common App institution prior to randomization. Figures rounded and unknown categories omitted.



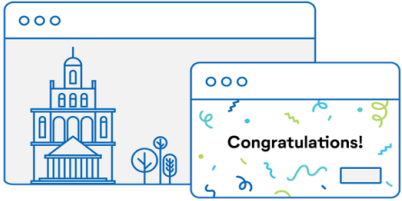
January 10, 2022

Subject: Your Direct Admission to [REDACTED]

Hi [REDACTED]

Congratulations! **Based on the academic information you entered in your Common App account, you have been selected for admission to [REDACTED] through the Fall 2021 Direct Admission Program.** Common App and [REDACTED] have come together to help high-achieving students like you go to college. This means we have reserved a spot for you at [REDACTED], and it's now up to you to decide if you want to accept this opportunity.

If you have questions about this program and how you received this letter, you can verify program information on the [Common App support site](#).



How do I accept this opportunity?
[Submit your Common App](#) to [REDACTED] **by May 1, 2022.** We've provided you with a unique code to answer the "Direct Admission" question on [REDACTED]'s Common App page. There is no cost to submit your application. (View [step-by-step instructions](#).) Submitting your Common App reserves your place at [REDACTED], but does not require you to enroll. That decision is up to you and can be made later.

"Direct Admission" student code: [REDACTED]

While this is not required, if you would like to be considered for a scholarship from [REDACTED], please complete either **A** or **B** below.

A. Input your SAT or ACT score into your Common App.

B. Email [REDACTED] at [REDACTED]. Let [REDACTED] know that you received a guaranteed admission letter and are interested in scholarship opportunities.

How do I know if this opportunity is right for me?

- Visit [REDACTED]'s [website](#) to learn more about the school and its degree programs.
- Talk with your family about this opportunity and how it may fit in your future plans.
- Share this letter with your school counselor, a teacher, or adviser and ask questions about anything you do not understand.

Where can I learn about financial aid to attend?


- Talk with your school counselor, your family, and [REDACTED] to fully understand your financial options.
- Learn about [financial aid](#) offered by [REDACTED]. Past [REDACTED] students have paid for tuition through a combination of financial aid, like grants, scholarships, or loans.
 - 98% of students receive some form of financial aid
 - 48% of students have their full tuition covered through aid
 - 25% of students graduate with no debt
- You may be eligible to receive federal or state financial aid. It is important to fill out the [FAFSA](#) as soon as possible to be considered for government aid. Read more about [federal aid](#) and [REDACTED] [state aid](#) programs such as [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].

How did Common App help make this opportunity available?
 Common App has not yet shared your information with [REDACTED] as part of this program to protect your privacy. We have selected you for this Direct Admission Program opportunity because you live in [REDACTED] and meet the GPA requirements for [REDACTED]. Your admission offer depends upon the information in your Common App account (e.g., home state, GPA) being accurate and successful high school completion as per your state's requirements. If you have any questions about this process or program, visit our [website](#) or contact admissions-info@commonapp.org or [REDACTED].


Attending college is one of the most important decisions you can make – one that can change your future! We hope that this is an exciting opportunity for you as part of your journey to college. We encourage you to continue your strong academic performance for the remainder of the school year.

Congratulations again!

Sincerely,



Jenny Rickard
Common App
President & CEO



[REDACTED]
Dean of Admissions
[REDACTED] University

FIGURE A.1
 Example direct admissions letter.