Accelerating Access to Postsecondary Education

Proactive and direct admissions in Kentucky and across the country

Taylor Odle, University of Wisconsin –Madison

2026 Student Access Summit · Bowling Green, Kentucky · November 2, 2026

Kentucky will have fewer high school graduates

47,000+

public high school graduates in 2024



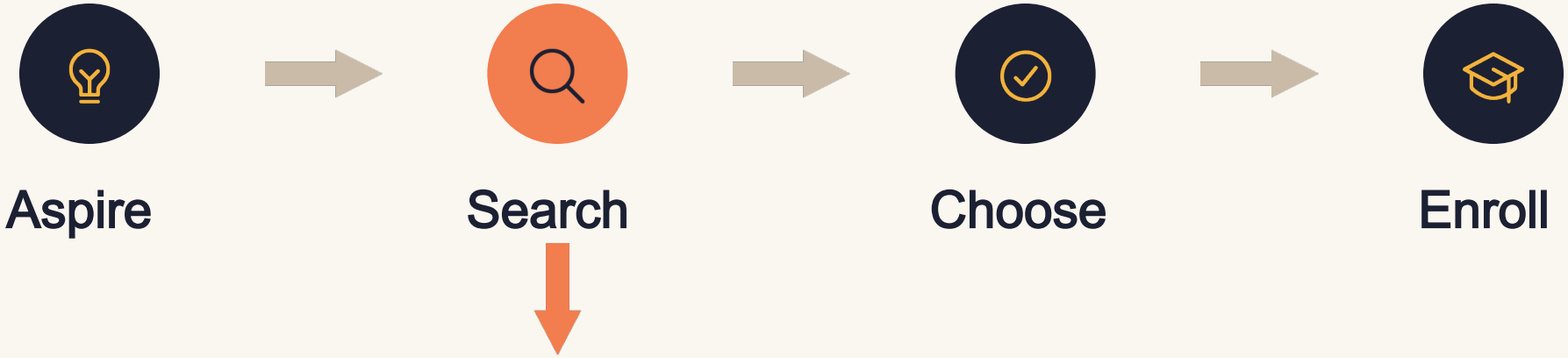
~42,300

projected for 2040

The drop will be felt most in rural parts of the state and among lower -income families. With fewer students coming through, losing any becomes more costly.

Source: Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, as reported by Spectrum News 1 (Sept. 30, 2026).

The path to college is long



The college application process is complex –and full of uncertainty

Applying to college isn't so simple



Each application has its own steps

1. Find colleges that might fit
2. Keep track of deadlines
3. Fill out each application
4. Request transcripts and letters
5. Write essays
6. Pay fees or ask for waivers
7. Figure out how to pay

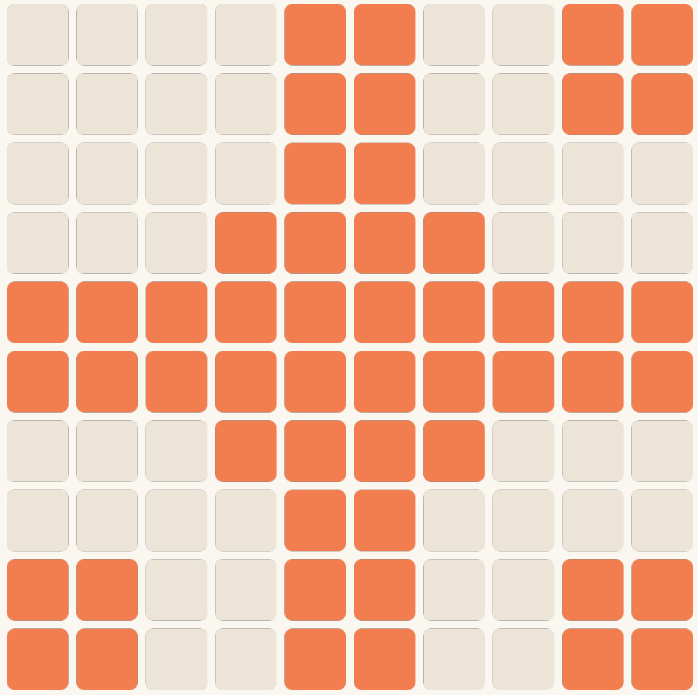
1 in 4

students who start a college application never finish

Academically, they look a lot like the students who do submit. They're more likely to attend Title I schools and less likely to have a parent with a college degree.

Source: Odle & Magouirk, "Non -Submitters," EdWorkingPaper 23 -819 (1.2 million Common App users, 2018–19).

How would you make this pattern symmetric?



Most people add a block to the empty corner.

Taking away the other three works just as well, but very few people think of it.

We tend to solve problems by **adding something**. In college admissions, we've added a lot of supports to help students through steps that may not need to be there at all. **Let's just remove them**.

Source: Adams, Converse, Hales & Klotz (2021), "People systematically overlook subtractive changes," Nature 592, 258–261.

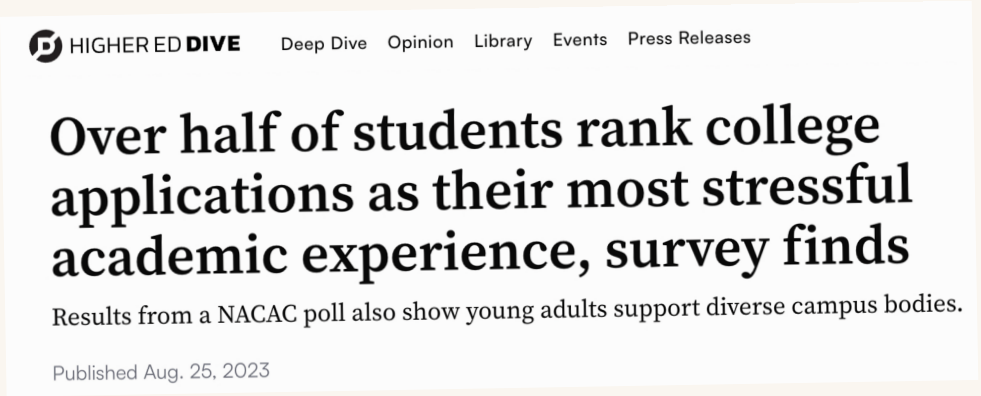
Because much of this process isn’t necessary

~8 in 10 applicants to public universities get in

33 colleges admit 10% of applicants or less

100% admitted at open -admission colleges

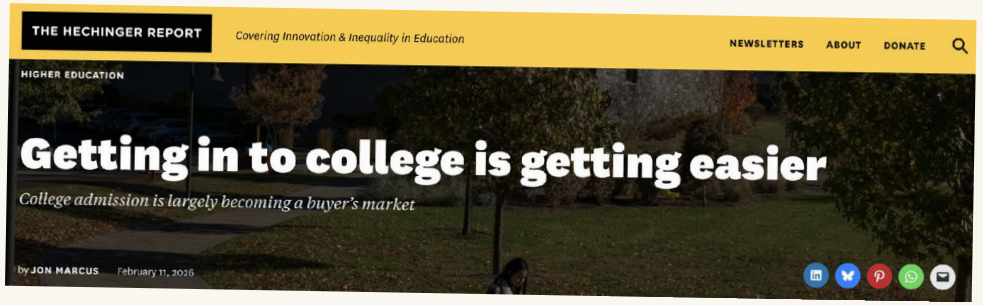
52% of students rank applying to college as their most stressful academic experience


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Over half of students rank college applications as their most stressful academic experience, survey finds

Results from a NACAC poll also show young adults support diverse campus bodies.

Published Aug. 25, 2023

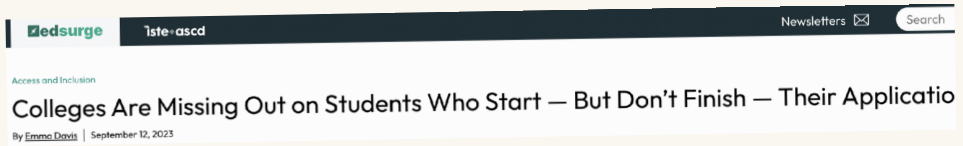

THE HECHINGER REPORT Covering Innovation & Inequality in Education NEWSLETTERS ABOUT DONATE

HIGHER EDUCATION

Getting in to college is getting easier

College admission is largely becoming a buyer’s market

by JON MARCUS February 11, 2026


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Access and Inclusion

Colleges Are Missing Out on Students Who Start — But Don’t Finish — Their Applicatio

By Emma Davis | September 12, 2023

Sources: NACAC data as reported by The Hechinger Report (Feb. 11, 2026); NACAC College Admission Process Survey, conducted by The Harris Poll (Aug. 2023).

What if colleges reached out first?

How it usually works

Students find colleges, apply, pay fees, and wait to hear whether they got in.

Proactive and direct admissions

States and colleges use information they already have, like GPA, to tell students where they qualify and what to do next.

Most students already go to colleges that admit most of the people who apply. For them, the application mostly confirms what the state already knows. ***This doesn't lower admission standards***. It tells students where they already stand.

Eight types of admissions redesign

Type	Admission assured early	Simplified application	Proactive notification	Application fee waived
Direct	●	●	●	●
Informed	●		●	●
Cascading	●			●
Self-reported	●	●		
Invitational			●	
Guaranteed	●			
Dual	●			
System		●		

Source: Duffy, Postsecondary Admissions Redesign at the State and System Levels: A Landscape Typology, Research for Action (March 2026), building on Odle & Delaney.

Where each type is in use

Direct

Idaho, North Carolina, South Dakota, SUNY, Tennessee, Wisconsin

Cascading

SUNY Match

Invitational

Georgia, Indiana, and where Kentucky's new proactive admissions fits

Dual

California community colleges to UC and CSU, Indiana's Ivy Tech

Informed

California State University pilot, Illinois (starting 2027), Minnesota, Washington

Self - reported

Alabama, Connecticut, Hawai'i, Illinois (2025 –26), Texas, Utah

Guaranteed

University of California, Florida, Michigan, Texas Top 10%

System

UC and CSU applications, Apply Idaho, Apply Montana, Apply Texas

Source: Research for Action landscape typology (March 2026); program data current as of December 2025.

What these programs are made of

Early information

Students hear from colleges before they've applied anywhere.

Certainty

Students know where they're eligible, or where they're already admitted.

A simpler application

Fewer questions and no essays, with many records pre -filled or automated processes.

No fees

Fee waivers that apply automatically.

Trusted adults

Parents, counselors, and others hear about the letter too.

Cost

Information on what college will cost and what aid the student may get.

Most programs combine several of these.

Source: adapted from Odle & Delaney, EdWorkingPaper 23-834 (2025).

What happened when we tested it

With the Common App and six universities in four states, we randomly assigned about 32,000 students to get a direct admission offer, a simpler application, and a fee waiver.

+12%

more likely to submit any college application (+2.7 points)

~2×

as likely to apply to the college that admitted them

+4–5

points for first -gen and low -income students applying to the admitting college

But enrollment didn't change. **Why?** These were mostly high achievers who were already headed to college, and about 86% enrolled either way. ***Focus admissions innovations on students most likely to benefit.***

Source: Odle & Delaney, "Experimental Evidence on 'Direct Admissions' from Four States," EdWorkingPaper 23-834 (2025).

Idaho, the first statewide program

Starting in 2015, Idaho admitted public high school graduates to its public colleges based on their grades, test scores, and courses.

4–8%

more first-time students per campus (50-100 each)

8–15%

more in-state students per campus (80-140 each)

Stable

enrollment of Pell-eligible students

Most of the increase came at two-year, open-access colleges. Pell-eligible enrollment likely didn't move because the program said nothing about financial aid.

Source: Odle & Delaney (2022), "You are admitted! Early evidence on enrollment from Idaho's direct admissions system," Research in Higher Education 63.

What states are reporting

Georgia MATCH

Letters list where a student meets admission requirements.

Fall 2024 vs. fall 2023:

Technical colleges	**+26%** applications	**+9.3%** enrollment
University System	**+10%** applications	**+6.2%** enrollment

Minnesota

FAFSA filing, 2023 –24:

76%

at participating high schools

50%

of all seniors statewide

Year-over-year and participant comparisons reported by the states, not causal estimates.

Sources: Georgia Student Finance Commission (Oct. 7, 2024); Minnesota Office of Higher Education.

Eiziah Lieblein

Milwaukee Marshall High School, Class of 2026

Milwaukee's program is opt -in. Families sign a form in junior year.

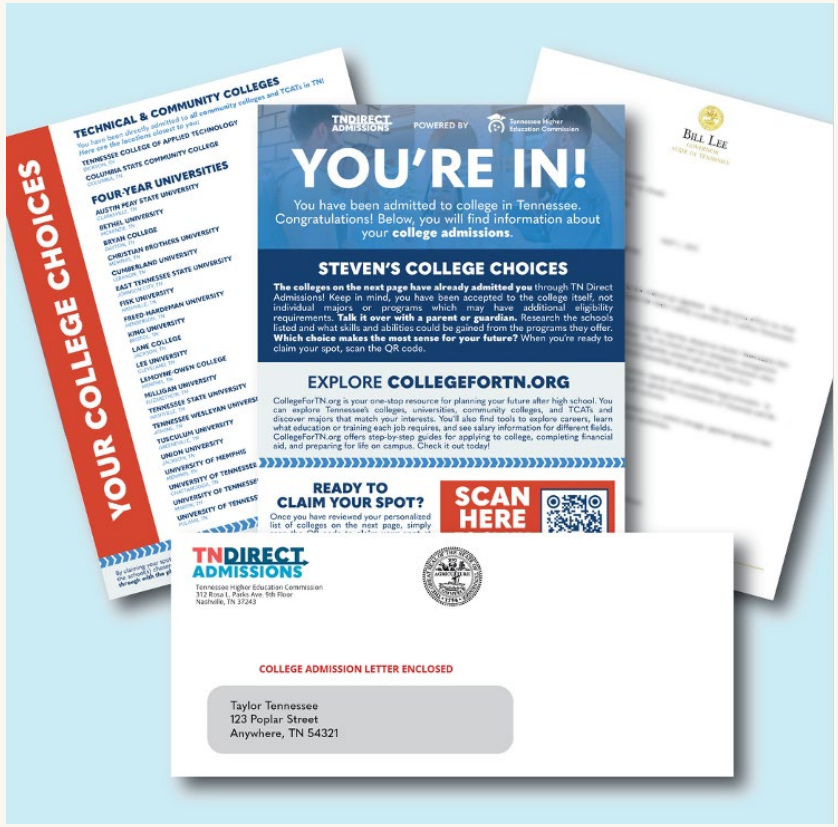
801 → 1,625

juniors who opted in, from the program's first year to its second

Source: Lumina Foundation, Summer 2026



What we're testing now in Tennessee



We randomly assigned every public high school to one of five groups. Each group adds a support on top of the one before it:



60,000+
eligible seniors

~42,000
received letters

Tennessee went statewide for the Class of 2027, with an aid estimate in every letter. Results from the pilot are coming.

DA = direct admission letter. Aid = personalized financial aid estimate. Nudges = text messages. Advising = dedicated advisor in school. Sources: THEC; collegefortn.org.

What we know, and what looks promising

What we know

- Letters raise applications, most for first -gen and low -income students
- Enrollment rises where programs reach students not already going
- A letter alone doesn’t answer questions about cost

What looks promising

- An aid estimate in the same letter
- A counselor or advisor who follows up
- Reaching students earlier
- State reports of more FAFSAs and enrollment

Design choices that matter

Choice	Options	What the evidence suggests
Who gets a letter	Students who opt in, or every eligible student	Opt-in reaches fewer students, and joiners tend to be more advantaged; **maximize eligibility**
Eligibility criteria	GPA alone, or GPA plus a test score	Effects are biggest for students unsure they'd go; focus on those **at the college -going margin**
What the letter says	Eligible to apply, or admitted	Our strongest results come from "you're admitted" letters; **guarantee admission and simplify steps**
What comes with it	Fee waivers, aid estimates, a contact person	In Idaho and with Common App, low -income enrollment didn't move without aid; **discuss cost**
Follow -up	Texts, counselors, campus outreach	Students stall on specific steps, but someone can help; **layer interventions, and don't discount comms**

Sources: Odle & Delaney (2022, 2025); Odle & Magouirk (2023); NorthStar Policy brief using Minnesota OHE data (Feb. 2025).

Where programs have run into trouble

Low participation

Only about 1 in 5 Minnesota students opted in early. Wisconsin is campaigning hard to raise theirs.

Junk -mail letters

Families ignore letters they don’t expect. The message, the sender, and follow -ups are critical.

Too many programs

Overlapping efforts confuse counselors and families. Alignment and diverse FAQs are essential.

Cost left out

Only Tennessee’s letters include personalized aid. Most programs leave cost out; earnings may matter too.

No follow -up

Students stall after the letter arrives when no one checks in. These are not “typical” students.

Changing campus role

The work shifts from raising applications to match and yield, so campuses must adapt.

Sources: Research for Action admissions redesign study for Lumina Foundation (2026); NorthStar Policy brief using Minnesota O HE data (Feb. 2025); Odle & Delaney (2022).

What K-12 partners and colleges can do

Schools and districts

- Under opt-in, invite every family, then follow up aggressively
- Make GPA and contact information available
- Be there when letters arrive; integrate into practice
- Help students finish the application and FAFSA

Colleges and universities

- Set criteria that reaches students most likely to benefit
- Write letters families can follow
- Add fee waivers and an aid estimate
- Reach out when students apply
- Think about your yield strategy

What everyone else can do

State agencies

- Facilitate data access
- Send one clear message
- Track and share results
- Layer interventions

Access partners

- Carry students through to day 1
- Focus on first -gen and low-income students
- Serve as a bridge and translator

Families

- Say yes to the invitation
- Open the letter together
- Ask what comes next

Everyone *Leverage this momentum–and take notes!*

Where this can grow

1. **Include everyone eligible**
   Idaho, Georgia, and North Carolina include every student.
2. **Offer admission outright**
   Our strongest evidence comes from “you’re admitted” letters.
3. **Put aid in the letter**
   Tennessee does this statewide; Washington is building one.
4. **Include transfer students, adults**
   SUNY Transfer Match admits community college transfer students.
5. **Simplify remaining steps**
   A short claim -your-spot form and fewer financial aid steps.
6. **Combine with other supports**
   Advising, outreach, and free application weeks.
7. **Start earlier**
   Engage students and families in 8th or 9th grade.

Sources: Research for Action landscape typology (March 2026); Washington Student Achievement Council, Direct Admissions State Strategy (Dec. 2025).

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