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Willis, Kent

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Kent Willis

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Direct Admission at the CSU: Early Outcomes and Statewide Expansion Under SB 640

Introduction

Declining confidence in the value of higher education, combined with rising student debt, has led many prospective students to question the traditional college path. Since 2010, college and university enrollment nationwide has dropped by more than 8 percent, reflecting growing doubts about whether the costs are justified by long-term benefits (Hanson, 2025). As completion rates stagnate or decline, colleges must develop new strategies that lead to measurable improvements. Students who start and do not complete college degrees forfeit significant potential returns—an outcome with consequences for both the individual and society. For instance, over a 40-year career, college graduates earn, on average, about \$1 million more than those with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Cheah, & Hanson, 2021). Direct admission programs across the United States present an opportunity to reimagine the path to college, lowering barriers and helping to restore public trust. The California State University (CSU) system is the latest to implement direct admission, and its early rollout will benefit from insights and outcomes across the country.

Background

One of the largest higher education systems in the United States, the California State University (CSU), enrolls just under half a million students annually across 22 campuses and 100 teaching sites (CSU, 2024). In 2023, select CSU campuses implemented direct admissions and pathways programs guaranteeing entry for eligible high school seniors, two years before California Senate Bill 640 (SB 640). With statewide roll-out, California now joins institutions in other states—including Minnesota, Wisconsin, Hawai'i, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Utah, Texas and West Virginia. Early campus pilot programs offer timely and valuable insight.

A grounded theory analysis of such pilots reveals that direct admission can streamline student pathways and enhance collaboration among universities, schools, and families. Yet these pilots also indicate that program effectiveness relies on sustained investment

and local community support structures. Rather than imposing one-size-fits-all solutions, policy should remain adaptive, drawing on lessons from early adopters.

This brief examines how direct admissions programs can deliver measurable returns for both students and institutions by improving enrollment, completion, and workforce readiness. It specifically proposes a Return on Investment (ROI) Framework to demonstrate how targeted resource allocation can enhance outcomes, particularly for students with high academic potential and financial need.

Recommendations

Policymakers and higher education leaders have the opportunity to build on early outcomes of direct admit programs through:

1. **Program Development:** Support the allocation of resources for direct

admission programs, prioritizing approaches that actively reduce barriers for college-eligible students. Streamline communication and enrollment processes to ensure that all qualified students understand and act on their admission opportunities.

2. **Assessment and Continuous Improvement:** Mandate regular, data-driven evaluation of direct admit programs at both the state and institutional levels. Use these assessments to monitor program effectiveness, track outcomes, and guide iterative improvements to maximize student success and institutional return on investment.
3. **Partnerships and Student Supports:** Integrate direct admit initiatives with robust student support services. Foster intentional collaboration between higher education institutions and community-based organizations to provide comprehensive wraparound supports—such as academic advising, financial aid counseling, and basic needs assistance—that address the full range of factors influencing student retention and completion.

Literature Review

This succinct literature review contextualizes the impact of direct admissions programs in higher education. It traces the model and early success of the first statewide direct admit initiatives and further examines how similar programs have evolved across other states. Overall, streamlining the application process can address critical gaps in access, persistence, and success, especially for students who may not otherwise apply.

In 2015, Idaho unveiled the first statewide direct-admit program in the United States (Odle and Delaney, 2022). The idea underpinning the Idaho program was to reduce barriers, with a particular focus on both socioeconomic status and geographic context. Early evidence suggests that pathways programs, achieved through direct admission, increase first-time undergraduate enrollments but have a minimal impact on Pell-eligible students (Odle & Delaney, 2022). In terms of enrollment gains, the largest impact was on 2-year and open enrollment institutions.

The Idaho Direct Admit model simplified the admissions process by guaranteeing students and families a seat at one of six participating public institutions. However, even with a letter sharing the program and alerting students and families, an application was still necessary. The program is primarily considered successful in encouraging students who were unsure of whether they would attend college, to enroll (Burns, Chawla, & Collins, 2024; Howell, 2018).

Several states have since launched direct admissions initiatives to broaden college access and remove barriers commonly associated with the traditional application process. Minnesota's Direct Admissions program notifies eligible high school seniors of their acceptance to a network of public colleges, aiming to increase college-going rates among underrepresented groups. Georgia recently introduced "GEORGIA MATCH," offering college spots to over 120,000 high school seniors as one of the most expansive efforts in the country. In some models like Tennessee, the program extends offers and financial aid information

to high school seniors for both public and private institutions. Illinois and Alabama have also adopted direct admissions, underscoring the growing appeal of this approach.

A total of fifteen states have some form of direct admissions. The increasing number of direct admit programs signals a national movement toward simplifying college entry in an effort to improve outcomes for students from disadvantaged geographic or economic background (EdSource, 2025; Forbes, 2023; Minnesota Office of Higher Education, n.d.; Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2025; University Business, 2023).

For policy research and analysis, it is necessary to consider how direct admit policies impact college-going rates. While 15 states have implemented some form of direct admit program, the models differ and scalability varies, which means that lessons can be learned for states that may introduce such initiatives in the future and for those seeking to improve existing programs. Specifically, the CSU program that will unfold in Fall 2026 may take into consideration some policy lessons from the prior state programs.

Strengthening the Evidence: Statistics from the CSU and California's Enrollment Trends

California's higher education leaders, particularly within the California State University (CSU) system, are confronting similar projected enrollment declines with impacts that reach far beyond campus walls. According to the California State Department of Finance, K-12 enrollment statewide is expected to drop by over 600,000 students in the next decade, and by an even more troubling 900,000 (15%) by 2045. That trend is echoed in high school

graduation projections: the state will see 60,000 fewer graduates this decade and could lose 100,000 graduates by 2045 (a 25% drop).

The economic downturn from 2007-2009 started a steady population decline across the country. The shrinking pool of prospective college students is only part of the challenge. In California, almost half of the public high school graduates do not currently meet minimum college eligibility requirements, leaving more than 200,000 recent graduates untapped each year.

In addition, California saw its first population decline in 2020 following COVID-19. Now the state is facing a demographic cliff with less students graduating from high school due to lower birth rates in the past (The Campaign for College Opportunity, n.d.). Nationwide, states facing similar demographic shifts have seen promising results from launching direct admit programs. These initiatives have helped mitigate enrollment declines, particularly among underrepresented groups, by proactively offering college admission to qualified students instead of waiting for applications.

California's move to pilot direct admissions, as envisioned under SB 640, should build on these lessons. If implemented thoughtfully, direct admission strategies can do more than keep seats filled; they can expand opportunity for students who might otherwise be left behind and help ensure California comes closer to its equity, attainment and return goals.

With SB 640 in play, the state of California has a real chance not only to curve declining numbers, but to turn this headwind into a moment for greater opportunity and impact (College Campaign, 2023).

Addressing Gaps with a Targeted ROI Framework

Most existing frameworks for evaluating return on investment (ROI) in higher education focus narrowly on benchmarks such as graduation rates or initial post-graduation earnings (Odle & Delaney, 2022). The ROI framework proposed here is designed to address these shortcomings. By specifically measuring the extent to which direct admit initiatives contribute to state objectives, such as workforce development and closing opportunity gaps, ensuring that investment is aligned with meaningful outcomes for both students and California's broader community.

Direct Admit programs launched alongside a complementary affordability initiative, addresses financial need head-on. For example, one program in California ensured that all eligible first-time freshmen and new undergraduate transfer students receive enough grant and scholarship aid to fully cover tuition and mandatory campus fees for the 2024–25 academic year. Eligibility requirements mirrored established state and federal aid qualifications, including Pell Grant or CA Dream Act eligibility, an SAI of 4000 or less, timely submission of financial aid documents, specific admission and registration deadlines, California or AB540 residency, and full-time enrollment (minimum of 15 units).

Effective direct admit programs demonstrates ROI by doing more than increasing enrollment. Fundamentally shifting the student's life trajectory who may otherwise see college as unattainable

provides measurable economic impact. The strongest results for student support are produced through intentional efforts, proactive collaboration, and a sustained commitment to both access and long-term student success.

The proposed Direct Admit ROI Four-quadrant Matrix serve as a practical framework to consider when aligning direct admit programs and aid strategies to demonstrate the ROI for both students and institutions. The model segments the student population into four quadrants: Academic Potential (low to high) and Financial Need (low to high). Each quadrant groups students by risk level, required support, and potential benefit from intervention.

This Matrix encourages strategic investment in student populations where the impact on both student outcomes and institutional sustainability is most significant, supporting an environment where access, equity, and fiscal responsibility are addressed in tandem. It also empowers institutions to restore and strengthen public trust through transparent, evidence-based resource allocation.

Table 1: Direct Admit ROI Matrix

Quadrant	Profile Summary	Most Relevant Student Services	Risk of Attrition / ROI Assessment
High Academic Potential / High Financial Need	Highly motivated, well-prepared students with significant financial barriers. (e.g., merit-need scholars, STEM talent, adult re-starters)	Targeted grants and scholarships, intensive mentoring, early academic advising, emergency financial aid, peer networks	Moderate Risk – High ROI
High Academic Potential / Low Financial Need	Academically gifted, financially secure students (e.g., honors cohorts, aspiring entrepreneurs)	Honors program support, enrichment opportunities, professional mentorship, minimal direct aid required	Low Risk – Moderate ROI
Low Academic Potential / High Financial Need	At-risk students facing both academic and financial barriers (e.g., bridge program candidates, students with insecure housing/food)	Bridge and remediation programs, comprehensive financial aid, wraparound basic needs support, intrusive advising	High Risk – Variable ROI
Low Academic Potential / Low Financial Need	Students with weak academic engagement but stable finances (e.g., under-matched legacy admits, disengaged learners)	Academic coaching, engagement and realignment programs, career counseling, performance monitoring	Moderate–High Risk – Conditional ROI

Actionable Insights for Practitioners

This policy brief suggests five key insights to achieve the best possible outcomes from direct admit programs:

- 1. Operationalizing Access:** Eligibility criteria for direct-admit programs must align with other policies that close financial gaps. Collaboration between student services, financial aid and enrollment management is essential to create programs that are both impactful and student-friendly, minimizing unnecessary barriers.
- 2. Doubling down on comprehensive basic needs:** Initiatives such as food, housing, emergency relief, to close financial aid gaps that often derail students with the greatest need, ensuring that direct admission is followed by sustained support.
- 3. Communication and Transparency:** Direct admit initiatives benefit from clear, timely communication with students and families. Tools such as visual guides and information sessions can reduce confusion, increase engagement, and improve yield.
- 4. Data-Driven Adjustments:** Leveraging the Direct Admit ROI matrix and real-time student feedback enables targeted outreach and timely adjustments. Monitoring barriers as they arise allows for immediate clarification of procedures and more effective support for students.
- 5. Impact Measurement:** Successful programs establish metrics from the outset—tracking not only enrollment but also progression, academic engagement, and financial wellness. Continuous assessment enables ongoing improvements and more meaningful outcomes.

Conclusion

California SB 640 has made direct admissions a central strategy for expanding pathways to college as well as rebuilding public trust in higher education. Early pilots around the country offer real-world model and actionable insights for how direct admission can be applied, scaled, and accessed across CSU campuses and beyond.

The American system of higher education drives economic growth and innovation. Continued strength and global prowess depend on stronger partnerships, clear accountability, and a shared commitment among policymakers and university leaders to continue supporting higher education. By working together to align access, support, and outcomes, more student's complete college, and higher education fulfills its promise—both to individuals and to society.

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About the Author



Kent L. Willis, Ph.D., serves as Senior Vice President for Enrollment and Student Engagement at Stephen F. Austin State University. A recognized leader in higher education, he previously held the role of Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management at California State University, Fresno (2022–2024), where he advanced innovative enrollment and direct admission strategies. He is an Executive Leadership Academy Fellow at UC Berkeley and brings extensive experience shaping policy and practice across higher education settings.