

Reimagining College Admissions

A Research-to-Policy Framework

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Families, communities, and our country benefit when individuals can access and complete the education and training needed for personal and economic well-being.

While overall undergraduate enrollment has increased in recent years, enrollment disparities for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian and Alaska Native students as well as students from low-income backgrounds persist at selective institutions.¹ Legal and policy shifts stemming from interpretations of the Supreme Court's *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College (SFFA)* decision, along with efforts to limit diversity, equity, and inclusion on the part of the Trump administration and several states, threaten to stall or reverse recent progress.²

College access and opportunity cannot be reserved for the privileged few. To help policymakers, institutional and system leaders, researchers, and other stakeholders expand college access in the post-*SFFA* era, we developed this research-to-policy framework. The framework is informed by conversations with more than 35 higher education experts and anchored by three pillars for admissions reform:

1. Reduce friction in the process to ensure postsecondary pathways are accessible to all students
2. Reenvision selectivity to expand opportunities for students from all backgrounds
3. Leverage disaggregated data to understand barriers and drive informed policy change

Research shows what limits college access, points to strategies to expand access, and reveals important policy questions about access that are yet to be answered. This framework details key insights from existing research and what we still need to learn to drive progress.

1

Reduce friction in the admissions process to ensure postsecondary pathways are accessible to all students

The typical college admissions process is a multi-stage journey that requires substantial resources, support systems, and insider knowledge to manage admissions deadlines, navigate financial aid processes, and curate academic and other portfolio components. Transformations in college access are possible if the application process becomes less complex. Research offers these insights that can simplify and streamline college admissions.

Early admission deadlines can limit access for students from low-income backgrounds:

Early admission policies compress timelines in ways that limit who can benefit, because they require students and families to be prepared early with test scores, college choices, recommendations, and financial plans. Early decision policies also require students to commit to attend an institution before receiving their financial aid offer. This means that students from affluent families are more likely than those from low-income backgrounds to apply via early decision and receive the boost in admissions chances it provides.³

Streamlined admissions programs can encourage access:

Programs such as direct admissions that alter typical admissions processes can improve college-application rates for Black and Latinx students, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds.⁴ The impact of direct admissions on enrollment is mixed, with some evidence indicating limited gains and research suggesting that meaningful shifts may require additional supports like advising and financial aid.⁵

Alignment between K-12 and higher education can smooth pathways to college:

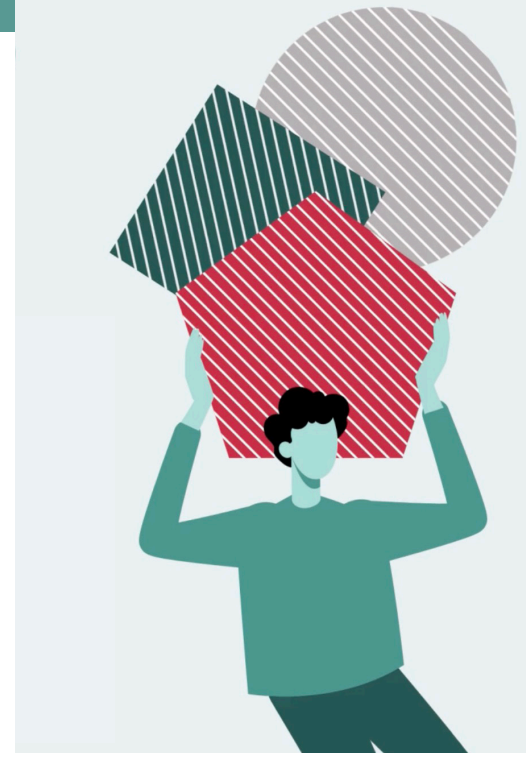
When high school course offerings and college admissions requirements are misaligned, students bear the burden of limited college options or last-minute course remediation.⁶ More coordination, dedicated resources, and strong partnerships between the K-12 and higher education sectors can remove obstacles that complicate the beginning of a student's postsecondary journey.

Need-based financial aid can help students enroll in college:

Access to need-based financial aid—from institutions, state programs, or the federal government—can be the difference between whether a student enrolls in college or not. Research shows that targeted outreach, transparent eligibility criteria, and guidance through the financial aid application process can improve the application and enrollment rates of students from low-income backgrounds.⁷

Further research to drive policy change:

Key questions remain about how to reduce friction in the admissions process in order to expand college access. Additional research should identify which components of streamlined admissions programs produce the strongest outcomes and ways to align these programs with other levers for expanding access, such as financial aid.



2

Reenvision selectivity to expand opportunities for students from all backgrounds

Selective college admissions is a broad and complex ecosystem, yet public discourse about selectivity often focuses on only a handful of institutions that accept less than 10 percent of applicants. In reality, selective admissions processes are widespread: nearly two-thirds of four-year and above colleges report having some form of a selective admissions process, 85 percent of which admit at least half of their applicants.⁸ Research reveals the following insights that can guide efforts to expand access at institutions with varying levels of selectivity.

Recruitment strategies can work against students before they apply:

Well-resourced institutions often focus recruitment efforts on White, affluent high school students and are less likely to engage with schools serving larger shares of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.⁹ Recruitment strategies are often designed to target recent high-school graduates, overlooking adult learners and transfer students, despite their importance for expanding access.¹⁰

Commonly used factors in selective admissions often benefit White students and students from higher-income backgrounds:

Institutions that receive more applications than available seats must make decisions about which students to admit.¹¹ Research demonstrates that several commonly used criteria, such as legacy status, demonstrated interest, standardized test scores, and letters of recommendation, provide admissions advantages to applicants who typically come from White and/or affluent backgrounds.¹²

Holistic review is a race-neutral strategy that can support campus diversity:

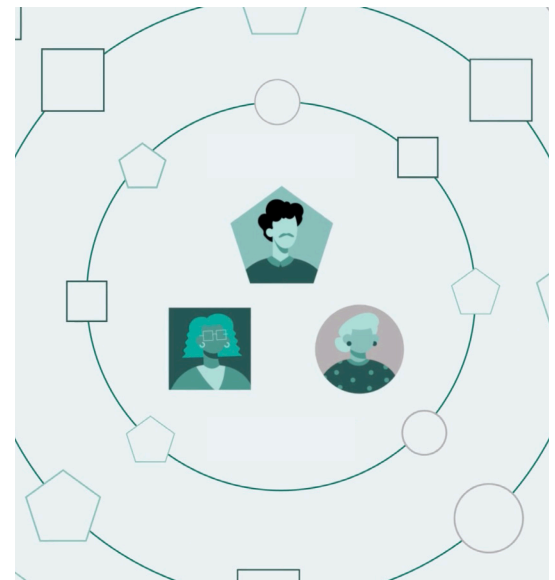
Many selective institutions use some form of a holistic review process to assess applicants using multiple academic and nonacademic factors.¹³ While some studies have found that the use of holistic review can increase access for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, further research is needed to understand the utility of this approach for broadening access.¹⁴

Performance assessments offer an alternative for demonstrating students' potential:

Performance-based assessments measure the competencies, strengths, and potential of high school students in ways that traditional metrics do not. Research suggests assessments can better predict first-year success than metrics like standardized test scores and may help diversify campuses when used to make admissions decisions.¹⁵

Further research to drive policy change:

Admissions practices can limit college access at both highly and modestly selective institutions, and existing research points to ways to improve these processes. However, reenvisioning selectivity to open pathways for students from all backgrounds into this broad set of institutions that are well-positioned to help students earn degrees requires exploring questions like, "what are the most effective levers for widespread change in admissions?" "how should merit be defined?" and "what race-neutral policies and practices effectively expand access?"¹⁶



3

Leverage disaggregated data to understand barriers in the admissions process and drive informed policy change

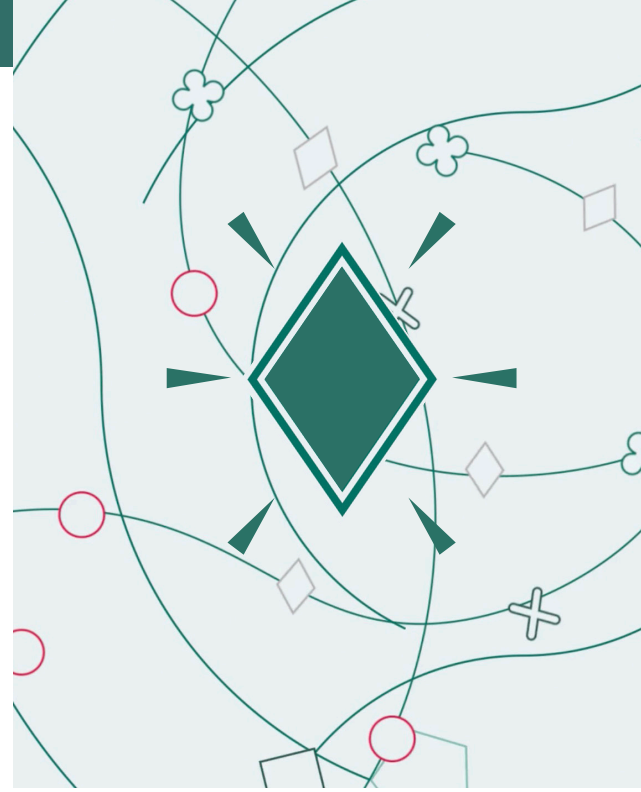
Robust, high-quality data are essential for reforming the mechanics of college admissions. Disaggregated data are the foundation of fairer admissions processes for all students.¹⁷

Strong data infrastructure supports innovation:

Investing in strong data infrastructure can spur and sustain admissions innovation. For example, California’s Cradle-to-Career Data System powers the CaliforniaColleges.edu portal that helps students track their transcripts and eligibility for enrolling in the California State University (CSU) system. It also supported CSU’s direct admissions pilot by providing timely data on eligible and nearly eligible students.¹⁸

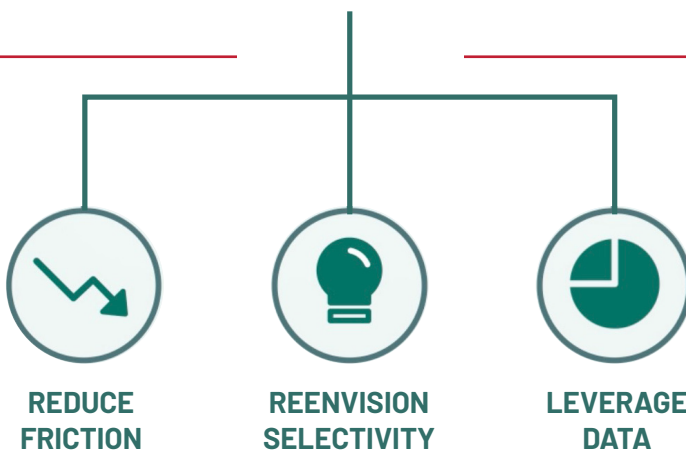
More insight into the admissions process helps to identify areas for policy reform:

Disaggregated data are essential to understanding students’ experiences and for identifying where targeted interventions are needed. Federal and state policymakers, along with institutions and systems, must ensure rigorous, transparent data collection and use data in good faith to help open opportunity for students.



Designing a more equitable admissions system

The college admissions system was designed to exclude students rather than expand opportunity. This framework challenges that system and calls for dismantling exclusionary structures by creating admissions centered on fairness and opportunity for all students. Each of the three pillars addresses distinct barriers. Together, they provide a structure and approach for research and policymaking to advance change at the institutional, system, state, and federal levels.



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