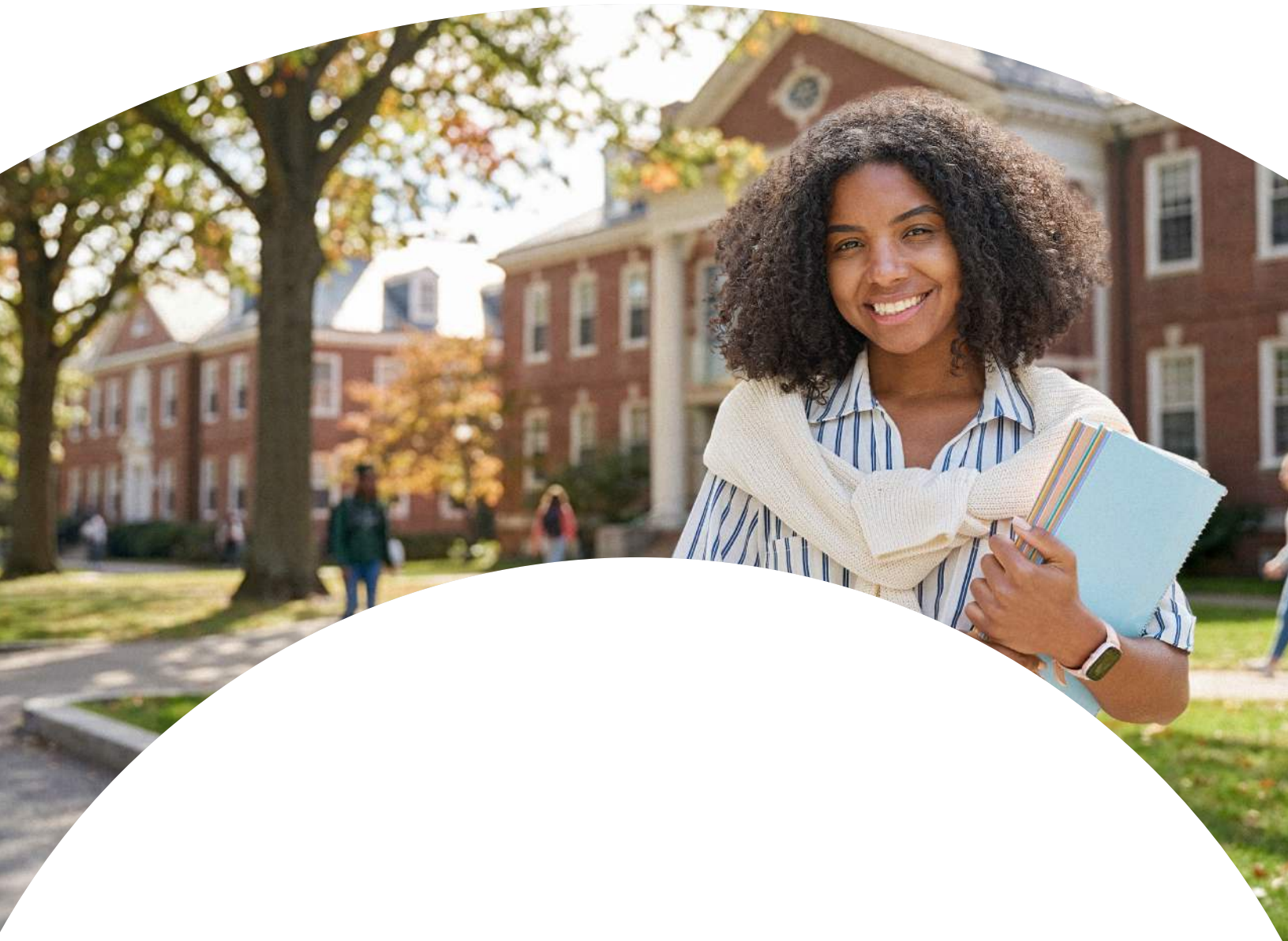




# Direct Admissions platform spells success for Minnesota high school seniors

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| <b>Category:</b>  | Operational Efficiency |
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# Executive summary

The Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) transformed [Direct Admissions Minnesota](#) into a scalable statewide digital platform that streamlined college admissions for more than 40,000 graduating seniors while reducing administrative burden, strengthening student data security, and expanding access to postsecondary education statewide.

After launching during the 2022-23 school year, Direct Admissions Minnesota quickly exceeded expectations. Rapid growth created operational and scalability challenges as OHE struggled to manage fragmented data systems, manual processes, inconsistent vendor data, and increasing staff workload while maintaining the integrity and equity of the program.

In 2025, OHE partnered with MNIT to design and implement a centralized Direct Admissions platform in just five months. The new system modernized data management, automated workflows, improved reporting capabilities, strengthened security protections for student information, and simplified participation for high schools and colleges. The scalable platform also positioned the program to expand statewide to all 800+ Minnesota public and charter high schools.

Today, the platform operates more efficiently and provides graduating seniors at participating high schools with clear information about colleges and universities committed to admitting them based on academic performance and projected graduation status. Students can pursue higher education opportunities with greater confidence while schools and colleges spend less time managing manual processes.

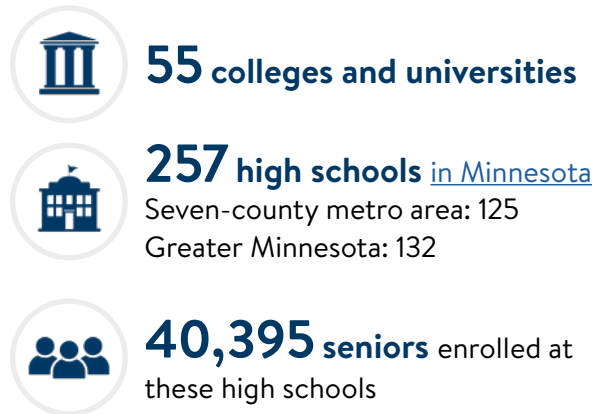
**Why it matters:** The Direct Admissions platform transformed how Minnesota students access postsecondary opportunities while significantly reducing operational burden for schools and program staff. The platform reduced the number of high schools manually uploading data from more than 150 schools to 50 and reduced staff time dedicated to data management from approximately 30 hours per week to fewer than five. **Participation also scaled rapidly, growing from 46 high schools and 6,989 students in 2022 to 257 high schools and 40,395 students in 2025.** The initiative demonstrates how digital modernization can improve educational access, strengthen operational efficiency, and support equitable pathways to college statewide.

## Idea

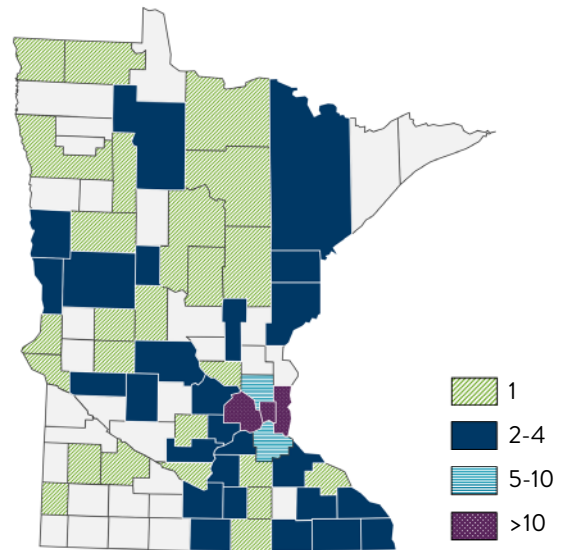
OHE leads Direct Admissions Minnesota, the state's first proactive admissions program in partnership with kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) schools and higher education institutions in Minnesota. The program, which is optional for high schools and colleges to participate in, re-imagines the college application process.

Each fall, students at participating high schools receive a personalized communication listing Minnesota colleges and universities that offer them proactive admission based on their academic record. Students can select the college(s) or universities that fit them best, complete their application, and be confident they will be accepted.

After the Minnesota Legislature established the program in 2021, OHE launched Direct Admissions in the 2022-23 school year. The popularity of the program soared, growing from 46 high schools participating in the first year to 257 this school year. Participants in 2025-26:



#### Number of participating high schools by county for academic year 2025-26



This growth, while remarkable, made it difficult for OHE to:

- **Gather reliable data.** The program relied on several different methods of gathering students' data — receiving files from student information systems or manually creating files. This approach produced inconsistent and unreliable data, created significant data-cleaning challenges, and increased the administrative burden on high school counselors.
- **Process all the data.** The massive amount of data needed manual cleaning, merging, and distributing, causing significant work for OHE staff and school staff.
- **Manage staff time.** The growing workload consumed increasing amounts of OHE staff time, limiting the agency's ability to focus on critical program improvements and long-term efficiency efforts.

#### Improving security, scalability, and program integrity

As the program expanded, strengthening the security of student data while maintaining the integrity and equity of the program became an increasing priority. Nearly half of participating high schools experienced challenges managing student data through their student information system.

To support schools and improve consistency in data sharing, OHE initially used Google Sheets to provide a centralized and accessible method for high school counselors to create and share student files with OHE. While this approach met immediate operational needs, the growth of the program required a more secure, scalable, and sustainable solution that reduced manual coordination between counselors and OHE.

In addition, prior to the Direct Admissions platform, student notifications were distributed through Google Forms or student information system vendors. This limited OHE's ability to independently manage communications and processes within the Direct Admissions program, creating challenges in maintaining consistent program administration and equitable access for students.

## Continuing the momentum and removing barriers

The student-centered program hinges on clear and early communicated college-going options following the transfer of student data. During the winter of 2024-25, OHE anticipated problems of decentralization and potential security risks would multiply as the program scaled to statewide participation unless improvements were made.

The OHE team partnered with MNIT to brainstorm solutions to:

- Scale the number of partners involved.
- Create an overall roster of students.
- Improve program operations.
- Deliver timely information to students.
- Alleviate the administrative burden of high school staffing and time.

Solving these problems would help:

- **Increase business efficiency.** After implementing the platform, OHE reduced staff time dedicated to data cleaning, management, and distribution from about 30 hours per week to less than five hours.
- **Improve data reliability.** The tool standardizes data across all users, decreasing confusion and errors.
- **Strengthen program autonomy.** Participating high schools gain better insights into their students' decisions and college application needs. Meanwhile, participating colleges and universities can manage communications directly and align outreach with appropriate student timelines.
- **Allow for rapid scaling of program.** The new Direct Admissions platform can grow with the program and requires minimal additional technology supports.

## Implementation

OHE's primary technology goal was to integrate and use available tools and systems to ease the burden of implementing the Direct Admissions program on K-12 and college staff, while allowing for the scaling of the program to all 800+ Minnesota public and charter high schools.

To achieve the goal, OHE and MNIT made significant technological process improvements. During a five-month period in the summer of 2025, OHE and MNIT created and implemented a homegrown platform that centralizes data for:



### High school counselors

OHE and MNIT created a student roster and dashboard to assist with accountability and data exchange.



### College partners

OHE and MNIT created a dashboard that allows for the ability to download student files in real time and review institution-specific and peer comparison data.



### Students

OHE and MNIT created unique survey links with critical college application information that can be changed anytime.

## Cross-sector collaboration

This initiative represented a highly collaborative effort across many sectors. Engaging business partners from the beginning helped solidify their approval and adoption. Key project partners included:

- **MNIT:** Platform architecture, development, technical support, and integration.
- **OHE:** Program design, implementation, relationship development, technical support, and operations.
- **K-12 school districts and high schools:** Student data submission, academic review, and student and family marketing and engagement from 257+ high schools across the state.
- **Postsecondary colleges and universities:** Admissions recruitment and operations from 55 participating postsecondary partners from every segment of higher education (two-year public community and technical colleges; Tribal colleges; and four-year public and private colleges and universities).
- **Minnesota Department of Education and student information system vendors:** Data standards and system interoperability with the five state-approved student information system technology platforms.

The student information system vendors developed functionality within their own system to meet the reporting and secure file transfer requirements. The technology developed was integrated into their software platform and made available to all their contracted high schools that participate in the program, at no cost to the schools.

The platform launched in September 2025, when secondary schools resumed. OHE used the platform to access quality-assured data files and send students emails with surveys that allowed them to select colleges of interest.

## Developing targeted solutions to overcome roadblocks

The project required careful coordination of timelines and workloads across multiple partners, including student information system vendors, OHE staff, high school counselors, college administrators, and MNIT.

The team addressed these challenges by:

- Bringing in a business analyst to maintain project timelines and coordination.
- Conducting continuous smoke testing throughout development.
- Gathering feedback and consultation from counselors, vendor partners, and agency staff.

The project also needed to process large volumes of data from multiple sources while maintaining clean, reliable records. To support this work, MNIT and OHE used Microsoft Power Platform to build efficient operational solutions.



# Impact

The Direct Admissions program had reached a point where maintaining efficiency and data security required a modern, scalable, user-friendly platform. The consequences of not addressing these issues would have been immense. Minnesota historically is a net-export state when it comes to college postsecondary access. Additionally, the state has persistent and pervasive gaps in higher education attainment for historically underrepresented and marginalized groups.

To complement the state's attainment goal and to lean into a new paradigm of college access, Direct Admissions needed to thrive. The downstream effect could impact a workforce shortfall of talented and trained employees and civically engaged and healthier citizens. Moreover, the program supports the aspiration of countering intergenerational poverty through promoting college access and degree attainment.

The collaboration between OHE and MNIT resulted in a platform that provides:

- High school counselors with autonomy and support of their college application work.
- Colleges and universities with the ability to download students' requests for admissions in real time.
- Students with essential college preparation and admission support.

- Direct Admissions staff at OHE time to focus on program improvements and scaling.

Since the first year, the platform has been a resounding success. Users report positive experiences with the Direct Admissions tool, and any issues that arose were easy to navigate and address in a timely fashion. [Participation in the Direct Admission program](#) continues to grow.

## Improving customer experience

With a focus on customer experience, MNIT staff partnering with OHE reduced the burden on school districts and higher education systems while maximizing the value of the data. MNIT partnered with OHE as the customer experience strategic adviser, ensuring a seamless and positive experience for all.

Data shows that students participating in the Direct Admissions program have a higher rate of enrolling in a Minnesota college and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) — a key indicator for whether a student will attend a postsecondary institution.

In addition, high schools participating in Direct Admissions have higher college enrollment rates as compared to the three years immediately preceding participation in Direct Admissions.

## Direct Admissions program participation and implementation, all years

| Program years | High school partners who applied at program year start | High school partners who completed the program at year end | College partners | Counties represented across the state | 7-county metro area high schools | Estimated enrolled students in cohort | Proactive admission requests | Students requesting proactive admission | Percent of cohort |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 2022-23       | 46                                                     | 39                                                         | 51               | 28                                    | 20                               | 6,989                                 | 12,420                       | 2,016                                   | 29%               |
| 2023-24       | 142                                                    | 120                                                        | 55               | 42                                    | 71                               | 22,505                                | 34,751                       | 4,975                                   | 22%               |
| 2024-25       | 187                                                    | 182                                                        | 55               | 56                                    | 100                              | 31,172                                | 50,240                       | 7,755                                   | 25%               |
| 2025-26       | 257                                                    | 249                                                        | 55               | 61                                    | 125                              | 40,395                                | TBD                          | TBD                                     | TBD               |

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*“With Direct Admissions, we’re removing the anxiety and cost of applying to college,” OHE Commissioner Dennis Olson said. “Our goal is for every student in the state to see themselves as college material, whether that’s a bachelor’s degree, associate’s degree, certificate, or diploma.”*

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## Taking a unique approach

When direct admissions programs started with Idaho in 2016, the future of the initiative and its possible staying power was unclear. Today, over half the states in the country have some form of a direct admissions model.

Minnesota, however, features one of the most comprehensive direct admissions models in the country due to the:

- Number and types of participating postsecondary partners.
- Number and types of secondary partners.
- Incorporation of multiple student information system partners.

Minnesota’s platform also stands apart from many other state direct admissions models because OHE and MNIT developed it in-house. OHE viewed Direct Admissions as a public good and determined that the program should remain state-owned and operated, rather than managed by a third-party vendor.

Since the launch of Direct Admissions Minnesota, 16 states, one federal agency, and two higher education institutions have consulted the OHE team about operations, outreach, partnerships, data privacy, and technology used to support the program. As Direct Admissions continues to grow nationally, Minnesota’s approach provides a strong model for replication and success.

## Achieving desired outcomes

OHE and MNIT have successfully built, scaled, and modernized the Direct Admissions Minnesota program with a new platform that optimizes the way people, processes, and technology work together:

- Integrates data from multiple K-12 student information systems.
- Automates secure data transfer and student eligibility determination.
- Provides dashboards for high school counselors and college partners.
- Delivers personalized student notifications and collects real-time responses.
- Allows colleges to access and act on student interest data immediately.
- Reduces manual processes.
- Improves data accuracy.
- Adapts to the changing needs of the program as it grows.
- Enables the program to scale statewide, so all eligible high schools have the opportunity to participate.

## Success enables future growth

Minnesota is home to more than 800 public and charter secondary schools throughout the state, and the Direct Admissions program operates in 257 of them. With a scalable, centralized program tool now in place, the additional schools can be integrated more quickly and seamlessly as a result of this technological investment.

The successful launch of the technology platform fundamentally improved how the Direct Admissions program operates. Today, the centralized tool enables program staff to support K-12 counselors and college staff in promoting college access directly to students in real time at the start of their senior year.