Deadline update: first-year application trends through December 16

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Introduction

Common App is committed to expanding access and opportunity for all students, particularly those historically underrepresented in higher education. By analyzing up-to-date application activity from our expansive data warehouse, we can uncover and amplify trends as they emerge. The importance of communicating these trends to our community has never been greater, as students and families grapple with the persistent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report represents the second release in the "Deadline Update" series produced by the Data Analytics and Research team at Common App intended to provide timely insights and clarify trends in application behavior across our platform — the largest, most comprehensive source of higher education application data available in the U.S. You can find our last update for trends through mid-November here. We will continue to release these reports monthly, to coincide with major application deadlines across our membership and keep the public apprised of ongoing trends in the state of higher education applications.

Note: Each update in this series highlights year-over-year application activity for first-year applicants through a specific date (in this case, December 16) in the application season. Since trends from fall 2020 were anomalous as a result of the global pandemic, we provide an additional year of data for comparison in all displays. These analyses are thus restricted to the 853 members that have been continuously active since 2019—20 (referred to herein as "returning member).

Contents

Key findings

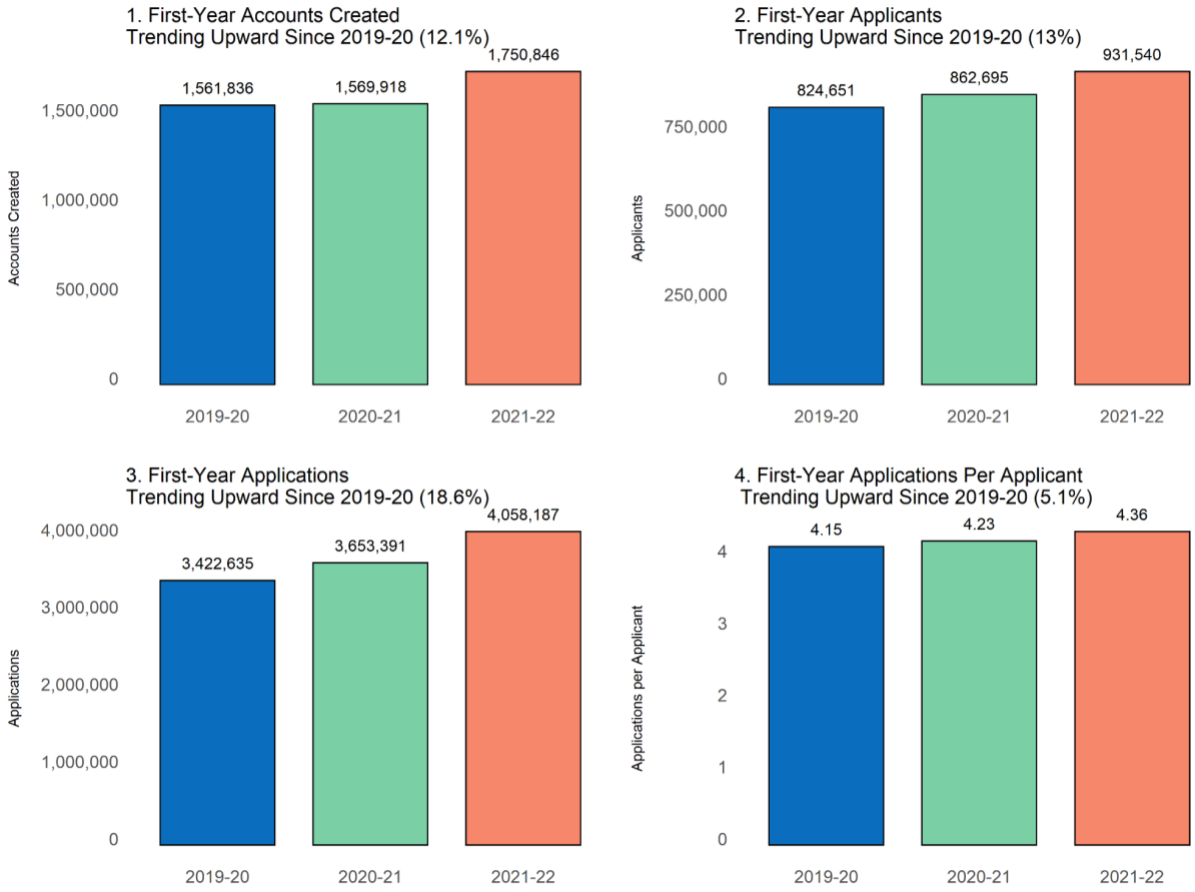
1. In general, the trends we surfaced in our November deadline update remain consistent as we examine applications through the mid-December deadlines.
2. Through December 16, 2021, 931,540 distinct applicants had applied to 853 returning members, an increase of 13% over 2019–20 (824,651). Application volume through December 16 rose 18.6% from 2019–20 (3,422,635) to 2021–22 (4,058,187), following a more modest increase in 2020–21 (3,653,391).
3. The relatively large increases in underrepresented minority (URM)[1] and first-generation ("first-gen") applicants surfaced by our report in November persist through this point in the season: URM applicants increased by 17% over 2019–20, while first-gen applicants increased by 21%. Indeed, first-gen applicants increased at nearly double the rate of non-first-gen applicants over the same time period.
4. About 58% of domestic applicants at this point in the season resided in the most affluent quintile (i.e., top 20th percentile) of ZIP codes nationwide. Applicants from the bottom quintile comprised about 6% of the applicant pool, in line with prior years' trends through this date and known trends in the socioeconomic diversity of early admission applicant pools.
5. Growth in applicants by state was more uniformly positive across all regions except the Northeast at this point in the season. We also note a surprisingly large decrease (59%) in applicants from South Dakota since 2019–20 worthy of greater investigation.
6. The number of international applicants has increased at nearly triple the rate of domestic applicants since 2019–20 (33% versus 12%). China, India, Canada, Nigeria, and South Korea were the leading home countries for international applicants.
7. As we've previously reported, the share of members requiring test scores decreased to 5% after reaching an historic low of 11% in 2020–21. The stark differences in test score reporting by student demographics (URM, first-gen, fee waiver recipient, and sex) we surfaced in the November update remain true through the mid-December deadlines. This at least partly reflects increases in access to testing sites relative to the early months of the pandemic, but could also indicate that applicants are calibrating their application strategies as test-optional policies become more familiar.
8. In contrast to our November update, a slight majority of applications received through this point in the season went to private members. Moreover, public members saw a much larger growth in application volume since 2019–20 at 26% (relative to 12% for private members). Growth by institutional selectivity was more uniform, with highly selective members seeing just slightly more growth since 2019–20.

[1] We use the term underrepresented minority (URM) in alignment with conventions employed by the National Science Foundation. In this report, applicants identifying as Black or African American, Latinx, Native American or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander are classified as URM applicants.

Overall trends

Through December 16, the numbers of accounts created by high school seniors (+12.1%), applicants (+13%), total applications (+18.6%), and applications per applicant (+5.1%) each increased from 2019–20. These trends are all generally consistent in magnitude with what we found during the November 16 report. **Figures 1–4** reveal year-over-year trends in each category across three seasons.

Figures 1–4: Accounts, applicants, applications, applications per applicant since 2019–20

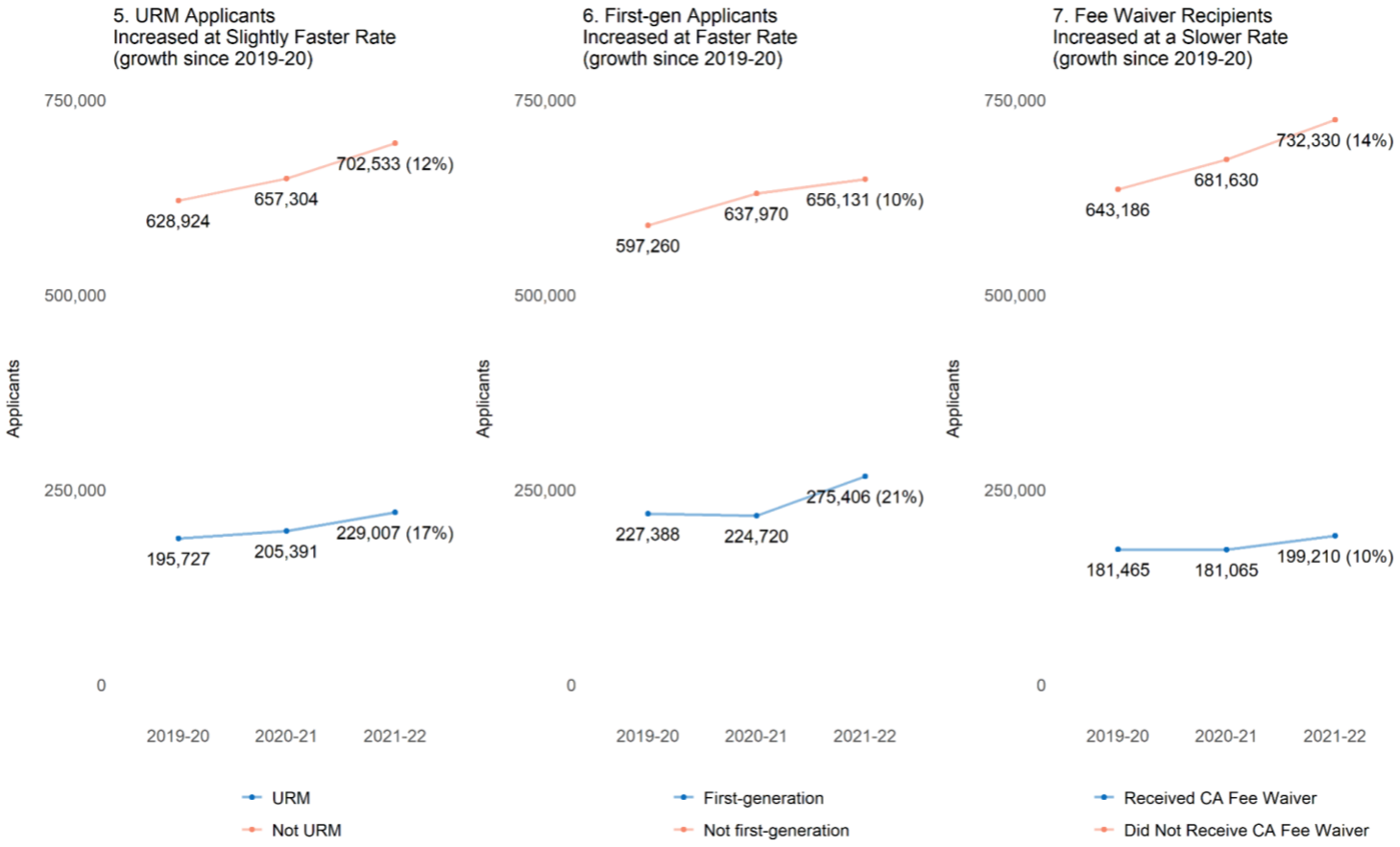


Applicant subgroup trends

In keeping with the results from our November 16 report, we find that applicant growth among underrepresented subgroups at this point in the season has generally strengthened since 2020–21, when we saw a concerning stagnation among URM, first-generation, and fee waiver applicants on the platform.

Figures 5–7 below showcase applicant trends over time by URM, first-generation, and Common App fee waiver recipient status. As with Figures 1–4, we see that the trends surfaced in our November 16 report remain consistent after the mid-December wave of deadlines.

Figures 5–7: Applicant growth across underrepresented subgroups since 2019–20



We show in **Figure 5** that after a very small increase from 2019–20 to 2020–21, the number of URM applicants rose significantly this season, to just over 229,000. This marked a 17% increase over the 2019–20 (pre-pandemic) total through December 16. This increase was greater than that for non-URM applicants across the same time period (+12%), indicating an increasing diversification among our applicant pool.

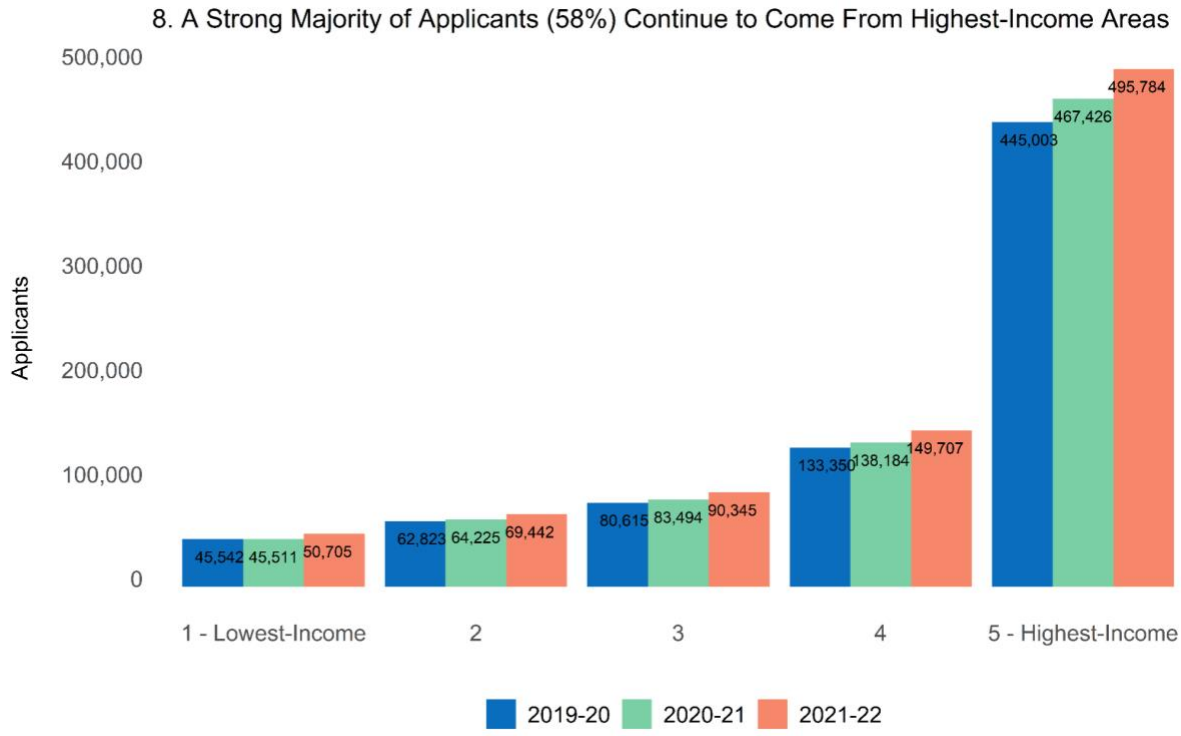
Figure 6 highlights the dramatic increase in the number of first-generation applicants (+21%), more than double the rate of annual increase for non-first-generation applicants (+10%). Given the slight decrease in first-generation applicants by this time in the 2020–21 season, this large reversal in trend is especially hopeful for college attainment among this population.

Finally, as shown in **Figure 7**, we observe only a modest increase in the number of applicants applying with a Common App fee waiver since 2019–20 (+10%) — substantially lower than the increase observed in applicants not receiving such a fee waiver (+14%). It is important to note that the total number of applications submitted either by applicants with a member fee waiver or no application fee each increased dramatically over the past few seasons (+35% and +32%,

respectively). As a result, it is reasonable to expect that fewer applicants request and receive Common App fee waivers as members remove fees and provide their own fee waivers.

To develop a clearer understanding of the socioeconomic characteristics of the applicants applying to college through Common App, we linked ZIP code-level median household income data from the American Community Survey (5-year estimates, 2015–2019) to each applicant residing in the United States. We grouped communities (ZIP codes) into 5 quintiles, where quintile 1 comprised the 20% of ZIP codes with the lowest median household incomes, and quintile 5 represented the 20% of ZIP codes with the highest median household incomes in the United States. In **Figure 8,** we present trends in domestic applicant totals by median household income quintile.

Figure 8: Applicants by quintile of ZIP code-level median household income



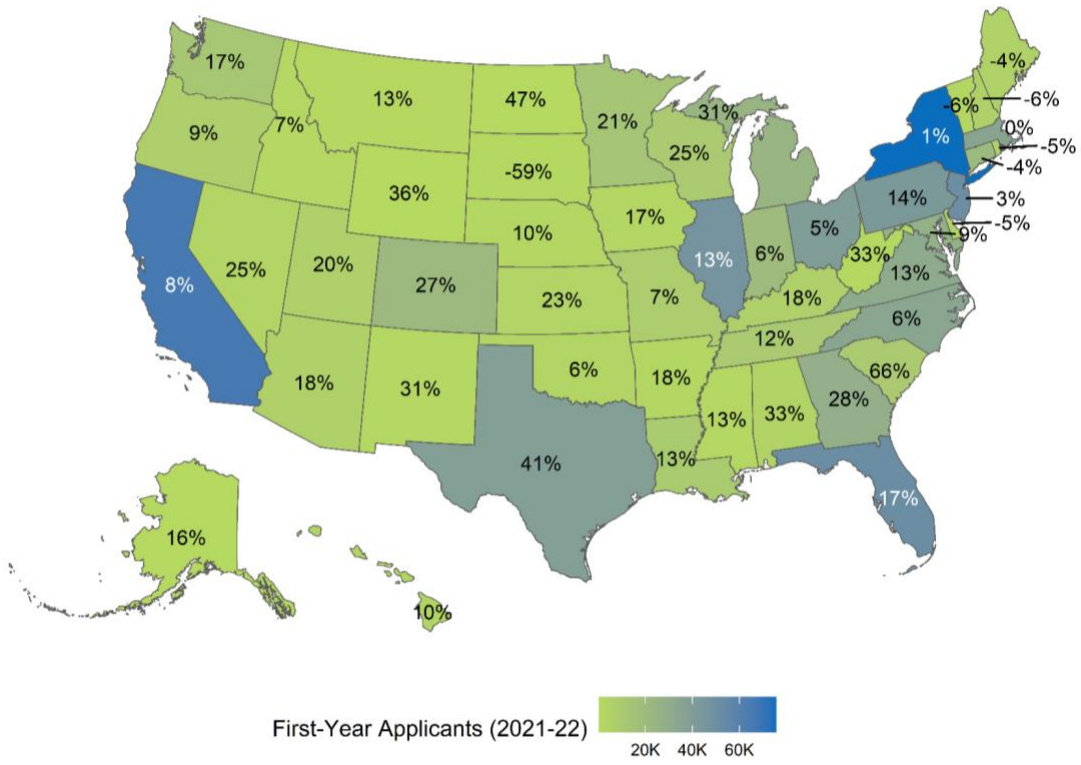
We again note that a majority (58%) of applicants came from ZIP codes in the top income quintile (20%), and just 6% of the applicant pool came from ZIP codes in the bottom quintile. These findings again largely mirror our results from the November update, indicating that applicants submitting to this later set of deadlines were not more socioeconomically diverse than those submitting by mid-November. We may see this trend softening later in the application season given that early admission applicants tend to be less diverse than regular admission applicants. These trends reiterate the imperative that more work is necessary to effectively engage and support students from across the country's diverse communities in the college admissions process.

We also observed meaningful variation in applicant trends across states. The map of the United States in **Figure 9** is colored to reflect overall applicant totals in 2021–22, while the labels

reflect percentage increases since 2019–20. While we noted applicant growth was generally concentrated in the Southwest and Southeast states circa mid-November, we see here that growth is now more evenly spread across the country — with the exception of the Northeast. As before, the states with the largest numbers of applicants were in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast regions, in addition to California, Texas, Illinois, and Florida (indicated by the blue fill). Interestingly, we observe a 59% decrease in applicants in South Dakota since 2019–20. This dynamic does not seem to be the result of colleges there changing their deadlines, potentially reflecting either an increase in applications not through Common App, or a potentially worrying trend for college-going aspirations in the state.

Within individual states, we observed differences in applicant counts based on whether they resided in cities, small towns, or rural areas. We linked ZIP code-level population density and urbanization data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service to individual applicants and calculated the share of applicants residing in metropolitan areas (with a population center of at least 50,000), micropolitan areas (with a population center of at least 10,000), small towns, and rural areas. We found that 93% of domestic applicants resided in metropolitan areas and that this share did not vary across years (not shown). We present a graph of applicant composition by urbanicity subgroupings in **Appendix Figure A1**.

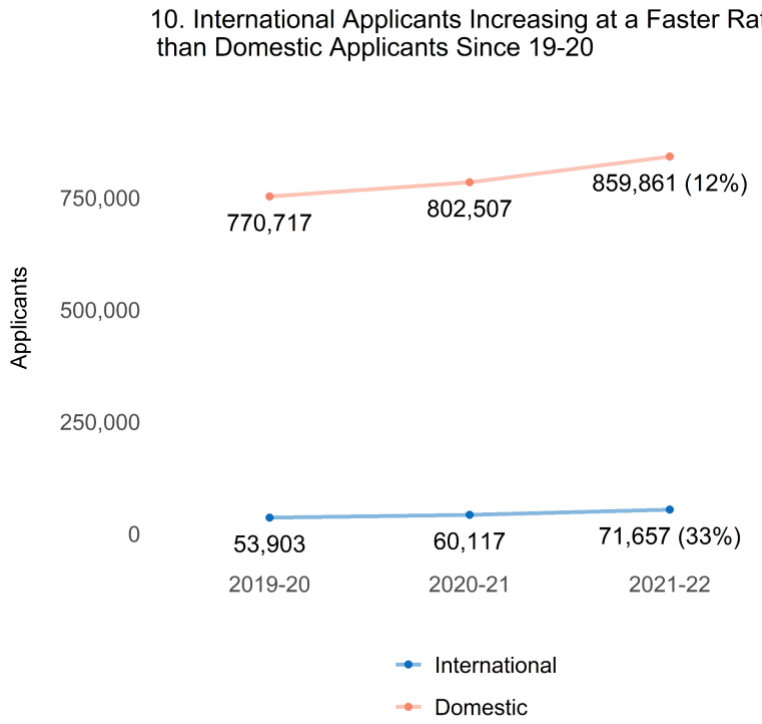
Figure 9: State-level trends in total applicant counts and growth since 2019–20



Turning now to domestic and international applicant trends, **Figure 10** presents a graph of applicant totals, grouped by domestic or international residence and season. We found that the number of applicants in both categories increased each year, though growth in international

applicants since 2019–20 (33%) was nearly triple that of growth in domestic applicants (12%). The top 5 home countries, in order, were China, India, Canada, Nigeria, and South Korea.

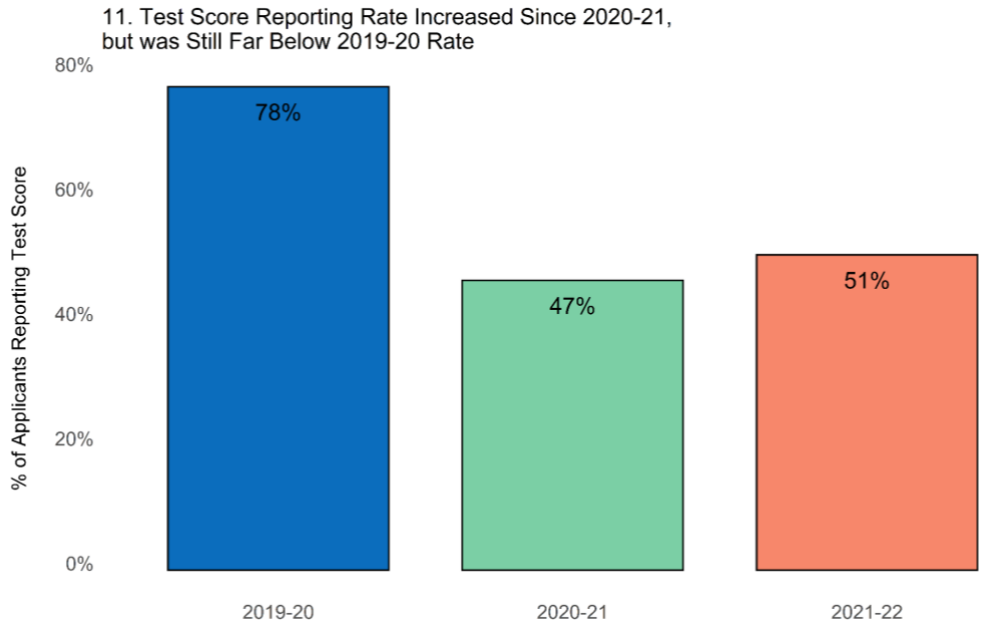
Figure 10. International and domestic applicants since 2019–20



Trends in test score reporting

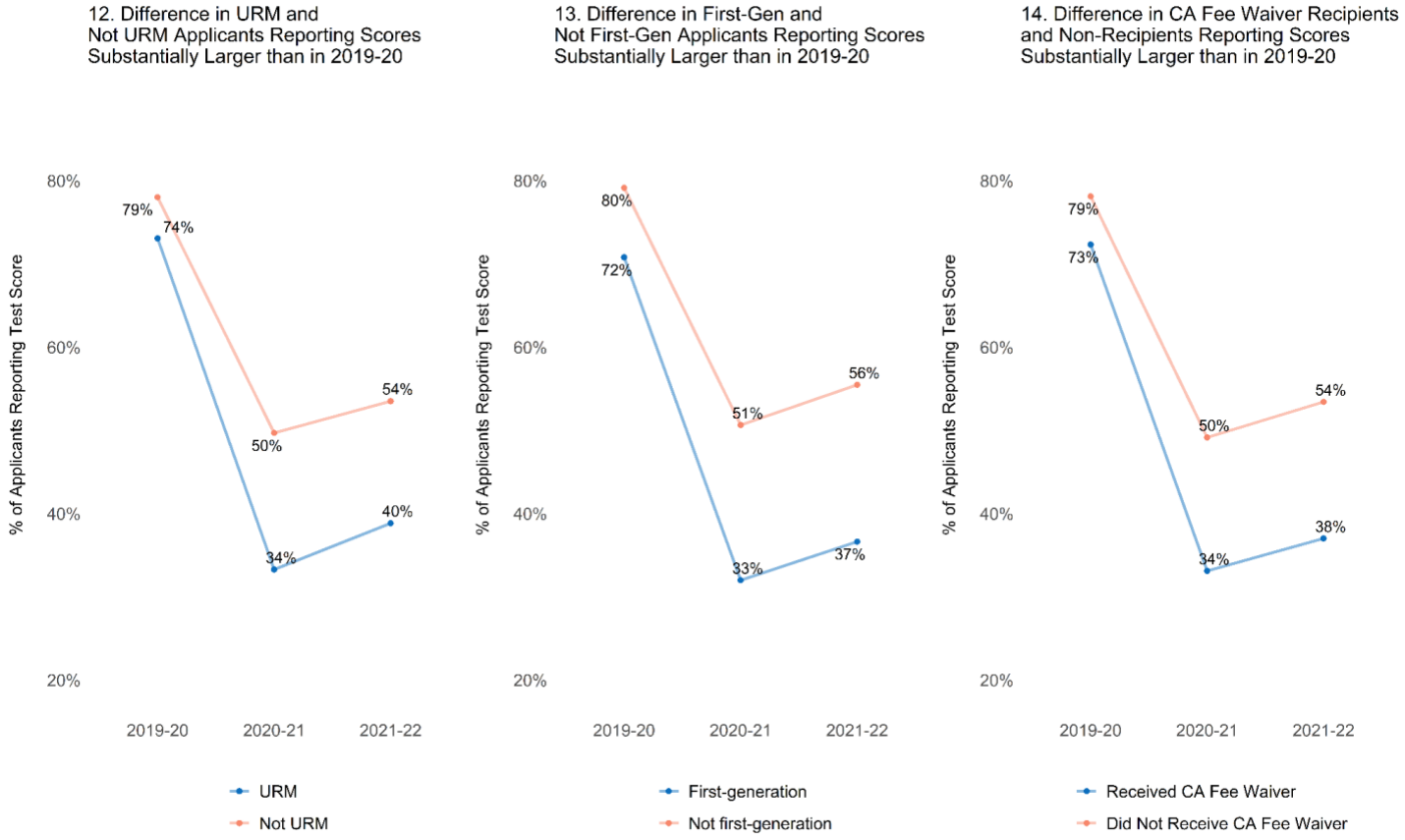
As we've reported in the past, the share of Common App members requiring standardized test scores since 2019–20 has decreased dramatically — from about 55% to just 5% in 2021–22. Given this dynamic, we will continue to report on the patterns of test score submission among applicants over the course of the season. In **Figure 11**, we show that trends surfaced in the November update remain consistent here: we saw a slight increase in student test score reporting, even as our membership continued to move toward test-optional or test-flexible policies. The slight increase in the current season at least in part surely reflects better access to testing sites than was the case at this time last season (see our previous research) during the early months of the pandemic.

Figure 11. Test score reporting rates since 2019–20



But even as test score reporting in general has increased since 2020–21, the disparities in test score reporting rates across student demographic groups that surfaced last year remain roughly consistent. **Figures 12–14** reveal that the differences in test score reporting rates across URM, first-gen, and fee waiver receipt status seem unmoved even as all groups still increased in their test score reporting. These differences existed prior to the pandemic in 2019–20, but were far smaller in magnitude across the board. We also find this trend is similar in gesture, though smaller in scale, for female and male applicants (see **Appendix Figure A2**).

Figures 12–14. Test score reporting rates across underrepresented subgroups since 2019–20



Trends by member characteristics

While we showed in our November update that public members received the majority of applications, the majority of applications submitted through December 16 went to private members. That said, the rate of application growth for public members since 2019–20 (+26%) was still more than double the growth for private members (12%). **Figure 15** highlights year-over-year trends in applications by institutional type — a striking difference in patterns versus our November update where public and private application volume were roughly equal for both 2019–20 and 2020–21 seasons. These dynamics reflect the compositional differences in members with deadlines in early November versus early December, and we will continue to report on these trends as the season progresses.

Figure 15. Applications to public and private members since 2019–20

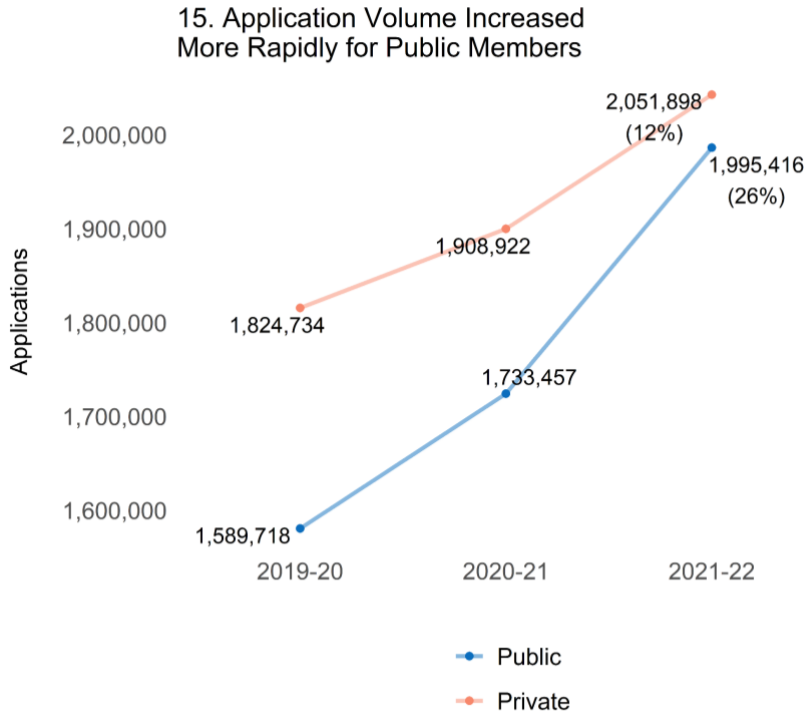
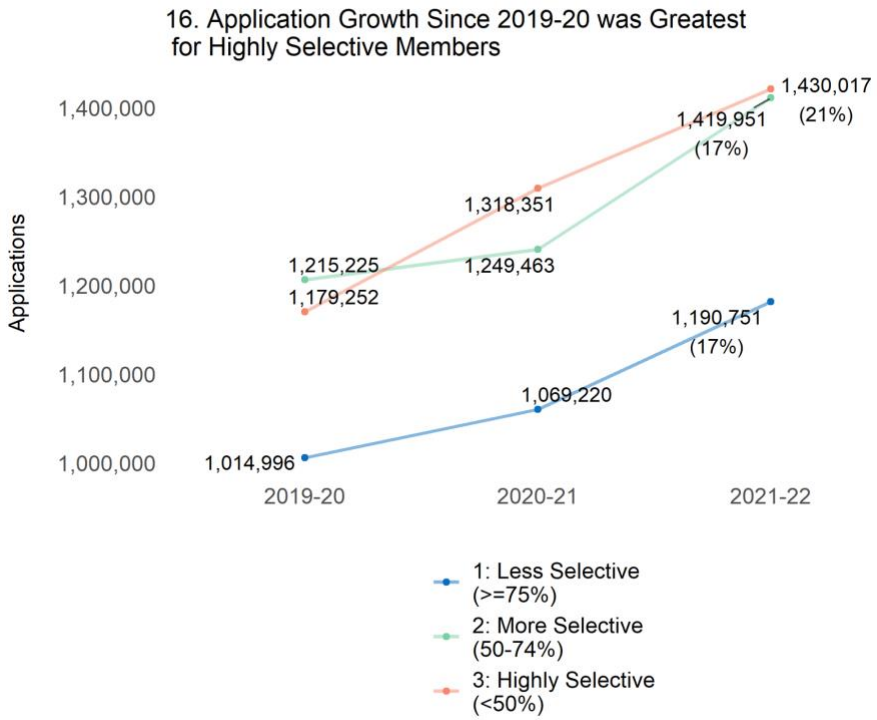


Figure 16 presents trends in application volume by member selectivity, as measured by undergraduate admit rates reported in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). We observe that fewer applications at this point in the season went to less selective members (admit rates at or above 75%). Even so, growth in application volume since 2019–20 was roughly the same across selectivity groups, with the highly selective members (admit rates below 50%) growing just slightly more over time (21%). These trends are far more equalized than what we observed in the mid-November update, where highly selective members saw over twice the increase in applications since 2019–20 than more selective and less selective institutions. This again points to the compositional differences in member institutions with very early deadlines in November versus December. Note that members with no selectivity data were omitted from these analyses.

Trends for many members, both public and private, are influenced in part by applications from in-state applicants. In **Appendix Figure A3,** we present a graph comparing the share of applicants in each state who applied to at least one in-state member institution. We find tremendous variation in in-state applicant shares across states but little change across years (not shown).

To support members' efforts to benchmark what they are observing individually against broader trends, we also provide tables of application trends by member characteristics in the Appendix (**Appendix Tables A1–A4**).

Figure 16. Application volume by selectivity since 2019–20



Conclusion

When examining application trends through the early December wave, we see the trends through November largely mirrored here. In that vein, applicants, applications, and applications per applicant continue to show meaningful gains since 2019–20; URM and first-gen applicants are increasing at a faster rate than their non-URM and non-first-gen counterparts; the majority of applicants at this point in the season come from the wealthiest ZIP codes; and test score reporting by demographic remains highly disparate. Breaking from November, we see enormous rates of growth for international applicants over domestic applicants, and greater application volume to private members rather than public members.

As the application season progresses, we will continue to provide timely analyses of the trends presented above. We will also monitor additional trends not presented here and report on them as appropriate. We will plan to release these updates monthly through March 2022.

Appendix

Figure A1. 2021–22 applicant pool composition, by urbanicity

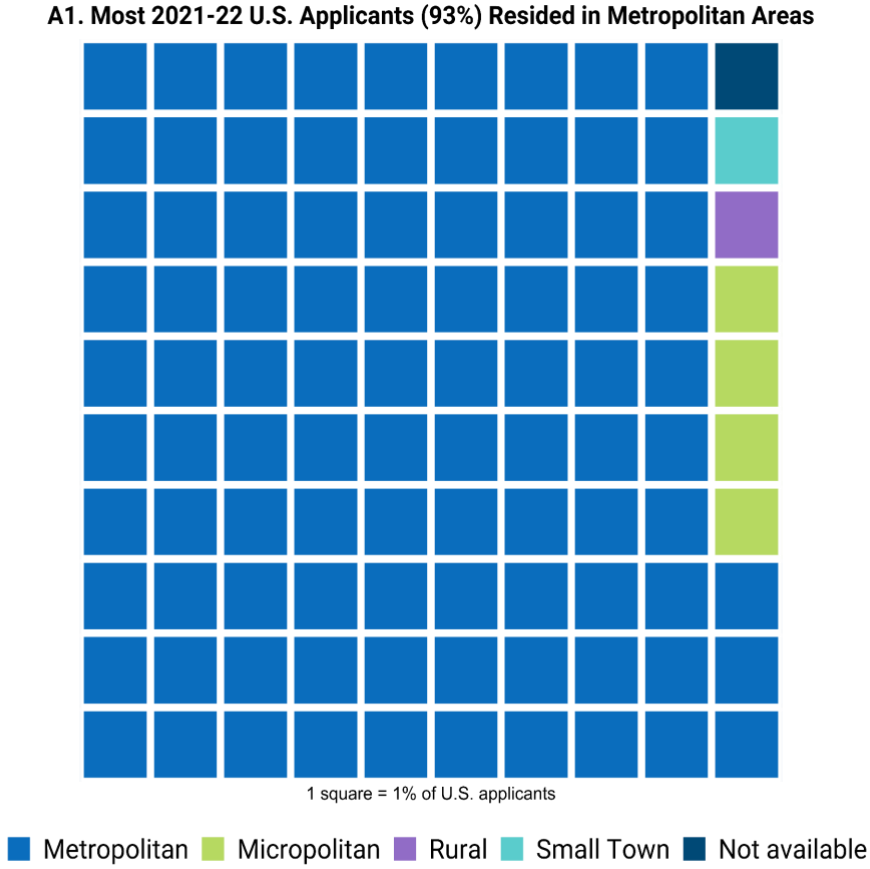


Figure A2. Test score reporting rates by legal sex since 2019–20

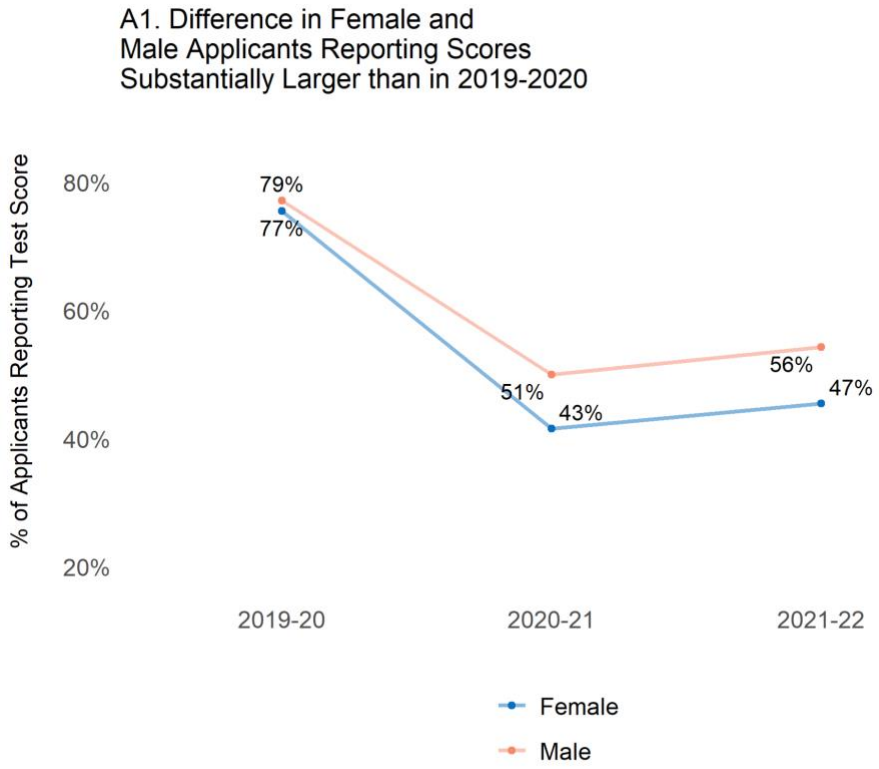


Figure A3. Percentages of 2021–22 In-state Applicants by State

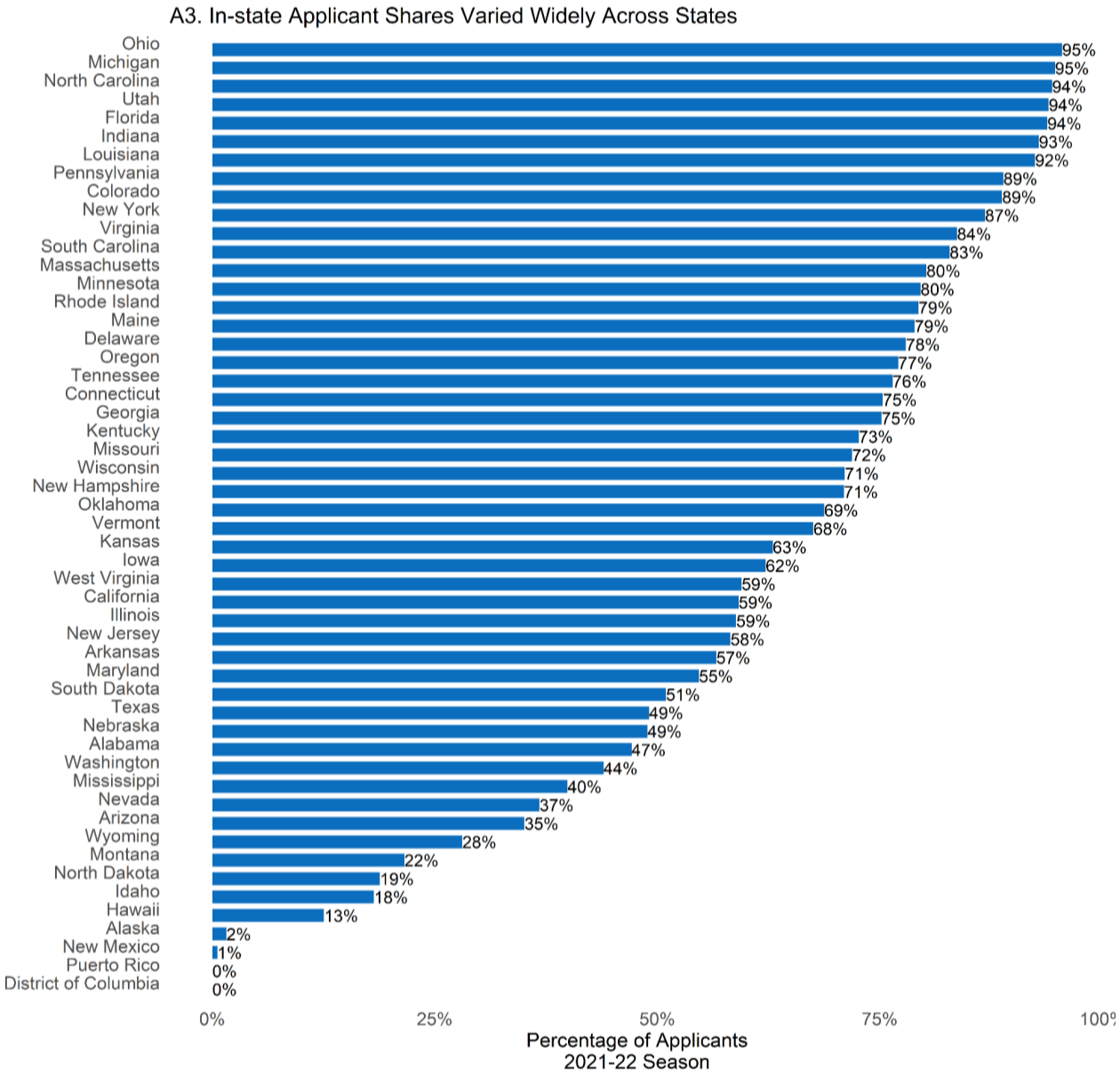


Table A1. Application trends by member region and institutional control

	Private			Public		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Mid-Atlantic	596,350	607,487	638,388	333,312	331,963	385,790
Midwestern	333,542	341,436	372,753	444,870	493,408	563,490
New England	335,253	350,637	380,551	163,690	158,690	182,081
Southern	298,277	326,213	363,851	490,113	555,127	642,093
Southwestern	50,240	57,423	66,790	22,693	30,007	38,279
Western	210,778	225,299	229,086	135,040	164,262	183,684

Note:

Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.

Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

Table A2. Application trends by member state and institutional control

	Private			Public		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
California	143,070	152,357	150,086	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	70,274	69,026	69,938	38,827	36,354	44,590
District of Columbia	37,428	38,730	31,786	NA	NA	NA
Florida	87,464	93,347	118,728	146,999	156,200	197,529
Georgia	41,144	44,631	50,130	NA	NA	NA
Illinois	98,844	95,207	103,475	NA	NA	NA
Indiana	48,164	49,168	51,493	81,834	84,990	97,272
Iowa	11,044	10,809	13,194	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	5,230	6,071	6,498	NA	NA	NA
Louisiana	35,947	38,073	34,982	NA	NA	NA
Maine	16,370	14,936	16,473	14,854	13,907	15,301
Maryland	31,439	31,356	31,269	20,529	18,906	19,796
Massachusetts	185,219	205,087	228,153	53,969	50,960	57,363
Michigan	16,971	18,970	22,640	97,378	121,730	140,017
Minnesota	18,873	22,915	24,877	22,621	23,822	28,150
Missouri	22,583	21,665	22,326	18,156	18,892	20,492
New Hampshire	16,060	15,861	15,998	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	57,194	50,607	59,666	46,920	37,268	43,986
New York	299,238	308,299	328,340	118,600	110,859	126,883
North Carolina	50,514	55,568	59,242	121,262	132,315	148,478
Ohio	86,043	90,387	98,870	135,523	146,971	165,322
Oregon	18,335	17,726	19,120	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	170,987	178,495	187,241	121,426	139,393	167,664
Rhode Island	38,501	37,112	39,190	NA	NA	NA
South Carolina	8,945	11,443	13,136	NA	NA	NA
Tennessee	34,896	38,958	38,439	NA	NA	NA
Texas	46,599	54,050	62,270	NA	NA	NA
Vermont	8,829	8,615	10,799	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	29,744	33,925	38,179	82,092	85,629	92,903
Washington	22,555	24,371	25,247	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	24,137	24,981	27,490	NA	NA	NA

Note:

Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.

Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

Table A3. Application trends by member region and selectivity group

	Less Selective (>=75%)			More Selective (50-74%)			Highly Selective (<50%)		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Mid-Atlantic	244,147	246,731	270,442	377,431	363,678	412,534	306,831	327,672	339,507
Midwestern	269,881	282,337	317,587	369,964	396,105	452,484	137,102	154,730	163,950
New England	133,084	120,015	131,375	156,262	150,084	168,288	208,759	238,440	262,102
Southern	193,520	213,917	242,450	217,941	240,990	276,262	376,202	425,669	486,076
Southwestern	17,133	21,576	27,276	11,075	14,317	17,923	44,668	51,470	59,815
Western	157,231	184,644	201,622	82,258	83,862	91,980	105,690	120,370	118,568

Note:

Selectivity calculated as undergraduates admitted as a percent of applications

Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.

Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

Table A4. Application trends by member state and selectivity group

	Less Selective (>=75%)			More Selective (50-74%)			Highly Selective (<50%)		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
California	8,041	6,685	7,436	35,915	33,190	33,280	98,475	111,797	108,770
Colorado	59,664	73,538	76,344	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	20,421	18,520	18,901	48,101	42,469	46,620	40,579	44,391	49,007
Florida	NA	NA	NA	66,950	69,151	85,365	157,616	170,216	217,952
Georgia	22,274	25,268	26,224	16,596	17,806	20,972	42,896	51,707	57,791
Illinois	NA	NA	NA	76,673	73,737	83,210	32,986	32,342	33,494
Indiana	53,131	53,909	58,534	66,888	69,361	77,060	NA	NA	NA
Iowa	17,576	17,978	24,130	6,866	7,245	8,044	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	15,869	17,646	19,509	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maine	20,142	18,250	20,351	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maryland	20,185	19,348	19,754	23,822	21,480	22,099	NA	NA	NA
Massachusetts	44,548	40,953	46,298	63,517	60,637	67,387	130,925	154,286	171,722
Michigan	18,461	20,697	28,952	49,121	59,770	72,611	NA	NA	NA
Minnesota	9,613	10,115	10,852	27,570	28,482	33,409	NA	NA	NA
Missouri	16,240	17,719	19,397	13,684	14,100	15,338	NA	NA	NA
New Hampshire	28,950	26,292	28,043	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	29,728	24,756	29,378	52,448	47,959	55,332	NA	NA	NA
New York	66,248	62,330	66,025	167,768	155,014	172,741	183,822	201,814	216,457
North Carolina	49,438	52,545	57,704	44,533	47,612	55,587	77,805	87,726	94,429
Ohio	107,463	111,422	121,867	82,751	92,504	103,859	30,730	32,900	37,900
Oregon	34,360	39,492	44,473	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	122,683	135,633	150,604	107,556	113,688	134,901	60,921	67,198	67,705
Texas	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	42,894	50,051	57,473
Vermont	6,338	5,455	7,063	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	45,133	43,294	47,930	16,946	15,853	17,742	49,757	60,407	65,410
Washington	13,674	15,023	14,701	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	15,784	16,558	17,468	40,366	44,581	52,020	NA	NA	NA

Note:

Selectivity calculated as undergraduates admitted as a percent of applications

Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.

Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.