

Common App research briefs

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Executive summary

Common App created its Data Analytics and Research division in February 2020, concurrent with a major grant-funded investment in data warehousing, to extract research insights from its vast stores of application data. This dataset is one of the most comprehensive available on first-year, first-time applications to four-year colleges and universities. We are proud to release our first series of publicly available research briefs to our members and the wider public, on the 2020–2021 application cycle.

Context

Common App currently serves over 1.1 million first-time, first-year applicants to four-year colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. These applicants generated 6.6 million applications to the Common App's 915 members in the 2020–21 season. Common App captures these data in a readily accessible Amazon Web Services database, but only recently began warehousing them in a format suitable for analysis and reporting.

Aided by a major grant from the Gates Foundation, and with the establishment of a Data Analytics and Research unit in early 2020, Common App has now invested in a robust data warehouse architecture and associated analytic capacity. This basic architecture was completed in October of 2020, concurrent with the expansion of the Data Analytics and Research team by two data scientists, in time to produce several analytic reports and summaries of application behavior through the 2020–21 admissions cycle. In addition to providing real-time insight to our member colleges and universities, elements of these data summaries were covered in over 60 media stories.

The series of research briefs introduced here expands upon the trends that surfaced in those member messages and in other internal analytic work founded on our still-evolving data warehouse. We hope that you will find them to be a helpful and provocative resource for understanding the behavior of high school graduates transitioning to the next phase of their educational journey, during a tumultuous time for the country and the world.

The dataset

Between the 2014 and most recently completed 2020 admission season, 349 institutions joined Common App, accompanied by an almost 50% increase in the number of unique applicants using the product. These applicants submitted an average of 5.7 applications each through the Common App in 2020–21, up from 4.6 applications in 2014. The growth in membership along with the increased average number of applications per applicant yielded an 87% increase in total application volume using Common App over this six-year period. International membership and applications represent a small, but growing portion of application activity through Common App.

As more colleges and universities use Common App, the number of high schools with applicants applying through the product has as well, with almost 27,000 high schools participating. Publics comprise by far the largest portion of the total schools represented, at 63% with independents (18%), religious (13%), and charter schools (6%) making up the remainder.

Figure 1. Profile of the Common App dataset

	Admission season						
	<i>(August 1 of displayed year through July 31 of subsequent year)</i>						
	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>
Colleges and universities (members)	566	641	724	772	821	880	915
Number of U.S. members	540	606	673	710	762	819	856
Number of states of U.S. members (including DC)	48	49	49	50	51	51	51
Number of international members	26	35	51	62	59	61	59
Number of countries of international members	12	17	19	21	23	24	25
Applicants (000s)	772	841	902	972	1,023	1,061	1,153
Applications (000s)	3,534	3,957	4,318	4,802	5,300	5,638	6,622
Common App applications per applicant	4.6	4.7	4.8	4.9	5.2	5.3	5.7
Number of international ¹ applicants (000s)	117.3	125.4	131.6	141.2	144.9	146.7	161.6
Number of countries of international ¹ applicants	217	214	214	213	215	213	216
Number of applicant high schools ²	22,469	23,303	23,897	24,531	25,313	25,877	26,961
Public high schools	14,900	15,359	15,445	15,775	16,141	16,415	16,898
Independent high schools	3,428	3,657	3,944	4,121	4,346	4,587	4,939
Religious high schools	3,185	3,221	3,323	3,345	3,407	3,404	3,525
Charter high schools	956	1,066	1,185	1,290	1,419	1,471	1,599

¹ Not U.S. citizen: Includes permanent residents, refugees, and dual citizens. ² Excludes home schooler and unknowns

Calendar of research briefs

Mid-August

State-level profiles. Our first product is one that we will continue to release annually, upon the close of each season — state-level summaries of Common App for all 50 states plus Washington, D.C. These will enable Common App stakeholders in the U.S., including high school counselors, college admissions professionals, and external researchers to better support the students that they serve in their regions of the country. These are formatted as slide presentations, and contain applicant demographics, institutional application volume, and year-over-year trends by state.

Late August

Pandemic patterns. Students applying to college in the 2020–21 school year faced unprecedented obstacles in their quest for higher education: Many lacked access to standardized testing throughout much of the year, were unable to tour college campuses, and were out of school for a considerable portion of their senior year. This research brief examines responses to a new question added to Common App specifically to assess how the pandemic

impacted them personally, explores some changes colleges and universities made in response to the pandemic, as well as how applicants changed their behaviors in response.

Test-optional admissions. Perhaps the most striking college and university response to the pandemic in the 2020–21 admissions season was the decision to make standardized testing optional – only 11% of Common App’s 915 members “always” required test scores in 2020–21, as compared to 55% the prior year. But this decision to move toward some form of test-optional was precipitated by factors very different from those that prompted prior institutions to drop the requirement for standardized tests. It follows that the consequences of this change in terms of member and student application behavior would be different, as well, and in this research brief we review these impacts.

Mid-September

College and university trends. A long-term view of Common App's expansion, highlighting the changing composition of member institutions with respect to their location, size, and other institutional characteristics. We also highlight changes in the diversity of members' applicant pools as the Common App nearly doubled in membership since the 2014-15 school year. Our goal with this research brief is to provide members, researchers, school counselors, and other stakeholders with a sense of the Common App member population and how it has changed over time.

Applicant and application trends. We turn from a long-term view of the member institutions to explore changes in the Common App applicant population as our membership has grown. Our primary aim in this report is to highlight trends in the composition of the applicant pool over time, particularly with respect to its inclusion of URM, first-generation, and low-income applicants. We highlight changes in the composition of international applicants over time, as well as in the home countries from which applicants are applying. Within the United States, we highlight trends in the top home states of applicants, as well as in the characteristics of the communities where applicants reside. We then examine the extent to which the Common App applicant pool has grown more diverse over time by exploring changes in the composition of URM, first-generation, and fee waiver-receiving applicants.

October

Norms report. In time for the busiest part of the 2021–22 admissions season, we will be releasing a dynamic dashboard tool that will enable our college and university members to benchmark their performance against their peers for the most recently completed 2020–21 season. Utilizing the power of *Tableau Public*, the tool will enable users to aggregate Common App data by a range of institutional characteristics (selectivity, size, control, and so on) and by applicant characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, region, and so on).

Dataset considerations

Although the dataset generated by student use of Common App does represent the most comprehensive available on the application portion of the so-called national college admissions

“funnel”, it is limited in ways that are important to understand when attempting to generalize to national (and global) trends.

Institution and student type. Common App currently serves public and private not-for-profit four-year institutions only. Although Common App does serve transfer students in partnership with Liaison’s centralized application service, transfer data have not as of this writing been ingested into Common App’s data warehouse. Plans are underway to integrate these data, as well, but these research briefs focus exclusively on first-time, first-year applicants and applications.

Decision type and term of entry. Although the currently warehoused data are for first-year, first-time students only, Common App members utilize the application for many different decision plans (e.g., early decision, rolling admission, etc.) and term start dates (both fall and spring). This is a particularly important consideration while the season is ongoing, but is also important to understanding that the complete season dataset includes more than only regular decision, fall entering applicants.

Membership. Perhaps the most important confound when attempting to generalize from patterns in Common App data to the national or global context for four-year colleges and universities is the fact that not all such institutions use Common App. There were 2,409 public and private, not-for-profit four-year colleges and universities in the United States in 2020, of whom 860 (36%) used the Common App in the 2020–21 admissions cycle (an additional 55 institutions from outside the U.S. used Common App).

Because these 860 U.S. institutions tend to be on the larger side, Common App accounts for over half of total application volume in this sector, but that still leaves many institutions and members unrepresented in our analyses. This fact means generalizations from Common App data to four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. generally should be made with caution.

In addition, the interpretation of trends over time within the Common App dataset are confounded by the fact that the population of Common App members has grown substantially since 2014 (see Figure 1). We correct for this confound by limiting analyses of trends over time to so-called “returning” members, that is, by excluding members that are not present across all time periods.

Common App exclusivity. A final important confound to the generalizability of analyses using Common App data is the fact that most members do not use Common App exclusively. As a result, the Common App dataset includes only a subset of application activity for these members.

Even with these considerations, the Common App dataset remains the most comprehensive view of application activity to four-year institutions in the U.S. – one that can provide unprecedented insight into an aspect of the admissions process that education researchers and policymakers have, until this time, been offered only partial glimpses. That said, the view is

imperfect in the ways outlined above, and it is important to keep these in mind when interpreting the patterns we highlight in this series of research briefs.

Figure 2. Common App members, by exclusive use, 2014–2020

