Pandemic patterns in first-year applications
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Introduction
Students navigated the 2020–21 school year amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which wrought immense health, financial, and personal hardship worldwide. For the cohort of high school graduates entering college in Fall 2020, the pandemic’s impacts were readily apparent. Early analyses of national data revealed that first-time college enrollment declined 13% in Fall 2020 relative to the prior year. Community college students, low-income students, and underrepresented minority (URM) students saw even greater year-over-year declines in enrollment.

Researchers and practitioners warned that these trends could persist and even worsen in Fall 2021. More recent evidence supports this warning, as 2021 FAFSA filings fell nearly 5% relative to 2020, and year-over-year declines were particularly large for students of color.

In this and other Common App research briefs scheduled for release in the coming weeks, we employ the analytic capacity of the new Common App data warehouse to explore the college application process at a scale that was not previously possible within existing data systems. Specifically, we use application data from over one million applicants per year to over 900 member institutions across the United States and abroad. In the following pages, we briefly summarize high-level trends of the first full application season of the COVID-19 pandemic, including students’ self-reported experiences over the past year, the extent to which colleges and universities changed their policies to reduce barriers to applying, and the extent to which students’ application behaviors differed from students applying in the year prior to the pandemic.
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Key findings

1. About 20% of students chose to respond to an optional open-response question on the Common App that probed their reflections on living amid the pandemic. Students’ self-reported experiences navigating the global health crisis reflected both immense challenges and perceptions of personal growth. While students across demographic subgroups responded at similar rates, we observed meaningful variation across American states in the share of students who self-reported “major community disruption” as a result of COVID-19. These differences likely reflect the varied experiences of people living through the pandemic in different states and local contexts.

2. Many colleges and universities chose to delay their deadlines and eliminated standardized testing requirements to remove barriers to access for prospective students during the pandemic.

3. Applicants, navigating an environment in which both their own lives and the parameters of the college applications process shifted without warning, responded by applying later in the cycle, and by reporting test scores far less often than in any previous year.
Applying to college during the global pandemic

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 remained in remote instructional settings for a considerable portion of their senior year.

Common App introduced an optional ‘COVID-19 community disruption’ question in the 2020–21 season to provide a space for applicants to share their experiences navigating life in the pandemic. Roughly 20% (>235,000) of all applicants chose to share their experiences in their applications.

We observed no meaningful differences across various demographic subgroups in applicant response rates to this question, but we observed substantial variation across U.S. states and territories. Figure 1 presents state- and territory-level response rates among applicants residing in the United States. We observed, for example, that applicants living in Puerto Rico (40%), California (28%), Guam (26%), and Alaska (25%) more frequently reported personal hardships associated with the COVID-19 pandemic than applicants in South Dakota (11%), Louisiana (13%), and Nebraska (13%). These differences suggest applicants’ perceptions and experiences amid the pandemic varied immensely across contexts, perhaps as a function of variation in both community spread and local/state policy responses.

Figure 1: Percentages of applicants reporting community disruption from COVID-19 by U.S. state/territory

Note: Vertical line indicates overall mean of 20%
We used applicants’ responses to this question to capture common trends in their pandemic reflections. We present in Figure 2 a word cloud that arranges the most frequently used words in applicants’ responses. Positive words appear in purple, while negative words appear in blue. All words are sized in accordance with the frequency with which they were used. Students most commonly included the word ‘strong’ in their descriptions of their pandemic experiences. Not surprisingly, ‘virus,’ ‘difficult,’ ‘fear,’ and ‘anxiety’ appeared frequently, as did more hopeful words such as ‘positive,’ ‘grateful,’ ‘love,’ ‘safe,’ and ‘support.’

Figure 2: Most frequently used words in applicants’ responses
Institutional responses to COVID-19

Colleges and universities also experienced unique challenges as COVID-19 spread worldwide. After abruptly canceling in-person classes, moving instruction online in the middle of a semester, and facing significant financial strain amid budget shortfalls, several colleges and universities took steps to attract students by reducing the burden of applying during the pandemic. Specifically, members delayed their application deadlines and relaxed standardized testing requirements.

We present in Figure 3 the share of institutions’ deadlines, grouped by deadline type, that were delayed in 2020–21 relative to the 2019–20 season. We also present the average length of delay by deadline type. Overall, the majority of deadlines were not delayed relative to last season. Among deadlines that were delayed, we observed that average delay times varied by their placement in the application season. Specifically, early decision deadlines were most often delayed (20%), but were delayed for shorter periods of time than other deadline types. Among those early decision deadlines that were delayed, the average length of delay relative to last season was roughly 11 days. This was considerably shorter than the 17-, 28-, and 26-day delay averages for early action, regular decision, and rolling admission deadlines, respectively.

Figure 3: Early decision deadlines were most often delayed, but later delays were longer

The trend of colleges adopting ‘test-optional’ policies was among the most widely covered and discussed stories of this college application season. Test-optional policies ended requirements that applicants report standardized test scores with their application materials. Before the pandemic, the number of colleges operating some form of test-optional policy had been steadily...
increasing in response to criticism of the fairness and predictive validity of standardized tests in college admissions. However, the dramatic rate at which colleges eliminated such testing requirements this season was truly without precedent.

Prior to this season, about 40% of Common App member institutions did not require test scores, and this percentage had been rising incrementally; as we report in Figure 4, this rate leapt to nearly 90% in 2020–21. We also found that test-optional policies were slightly more common among more selective institutions this season (93% vs. 88% among less selective members), though they had been significantly less common in prior years.

*Note: We derived selectivity data from IPEDS, where ‘more selective’ colleges were those where undergraduate admit rates fell below 50%.*

**Figure 4:** More selective institutions shifted most dramatically toward test-optional policies this season

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**Applicants’ responses to COVID-19, institutions’ policies**

Applicants navigated an admissions cycle shaped not only by COVID-19, but by member institutions’ changing application requirements. Encountering later deadlines and relaxed testing requirements, applicants responded with behaviors not previously observed in Common App data.
First, applicants applied later this season than in prior seasons. In Figure 5, we present a daily graph of application submissions in 2019–20 and 2020–21. The red trend line, indicating the 2020–21 season, trended closely with the blue (2019–20) trend line until we observed single-day volumes of over 100,000 applications on both November 15 and December 1, roughly double the single-day applications observed in the prior season. Once again, on January 3, we observed over 100,000 applications on a day that had reached 50,000 single-day application totals in previous years.

**Figure 5: This season's application trends mapped to major deadline delays**

Finally, test score reporting behaviors reflected changes in both access to standardized testing and in institutions’ policies. In 2018–19 and 2019–20, 72% and 75% of applications, respectively, were submitted with either SAT or ACT scores. In the 2020–21 season, when most institutions did not require these scores, this rate fell to 37%. We highlight this major shift in test score reporting trends in Figure 6.
Conclusion

In this report, we used data from the newly implemented Common App data warehouse to share some of the most significant structural changes in the 2020–21 college application season. Specifically, we explored students’ reflections of how the global pandemic impacted their lives and college pursuits, showcased some of the notable ways that Common App member institutions changed their policies to reduce barriers to applying, and described some of the ways applicant behaviors reflected these changes.

Perhaps the most striking trend in this report was the dramatic change in applicants’ test score reporting practices. Specifically, the percentage of submitted applications that reported a test score fell. In the accompanying Common App Research Brief on applying to college in a test-optional admissions landscape, we examine test score reporting patterns in more detail.