

Growth and change: long-term trends in Common App membership

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Introduction

Common App was [founded in 1975](#) as a small consortium of 15 member colleges and universities. By providing a common form that students could use to complete each of their applications, Common App reduced frictions in the college application process. Over the next 45 years, Common App grew to include many more members across the United States and around the world. Much of this growth occurred after 2014, when the organization, in an effort to increase access, equity, and integrity in the college admissions process, opened its membership to all accredited, not-for-profit, undergraduate degree-granting institutions¹.

In this research brief, we use data from the Common App Data Warehouse to clarify trends in the organization's growth from 2014–15 through 2020–21. We first describe the overall growth in membership during this period². We then present changes in the characteristics of the expanding Common App member population. Finally, we explore the degree to which historically underrepresented applicant subgroups have become more represented in members' applicant pools as the membership population has changed. We conclude the research brief by highlighting some of the steps that Common App will undertake to further increase the diversity of both its membership and the students it reaches in the college application process.

¹ This change removed a previous agreement that members require both a personal essay and recommendations for each applicant. It also removed a requirement that restricted membership to four-year institutions.

² Throughout this research brief, we define 'members' as those colleges and universities that were active members of the Common App and received at least one application in the season described.

Contents

[Key findings](#)

[Overall growth in Common App membership](#)

[Changes in the characteristics of member institutions](#)

[Changes in the diversity of member applicant pools](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Key findings

1. Common App membership has increased significantly since 2014–15. Overall, the number of member colleges and universities rose 67% from 547 in 2014–15 to 914 in 2020–21.
2. As the member population expanded, it also grew more representative of public institutions, colleges and universities in the Southern and Midwest regions of the United States, institutions with larger student populations, and institutions with less selective admissions profiles (as defined by undergraduate admit rates via IPEDS).
3. Common App has prioritized inclusion of Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)³ in recent recruitment efforts, and this prioritization is clearly reflected in the growth of member MSIs since 2014–15. Overall MSI membership more than doubled from 42 in 2014–15 to 93 in 2020–21. This growth was fueled in particular by a large increase in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) from 22 in 2014–15 to 58 in 2020–21.
4. The number of international institutions in the Common App membership increased dramatically over time. There were 24 international Common App members in 2014–15; this number grew to 59 by 2020–21.
5. Changes in the composition of Common App's member population were associated with shifts in the demographic profiles of members' applicant pools. In 2014–15, the typical member received about 26% of its applications from underrepresented minority (URM)⁴ applicants. By 2019–20, that share had grown to 31%. During the first full application season of the pandemic, however, this share fell to 29%, reflecting barriers facing underrepresented students during this challenging time. Over this same period, the typical member's share of applications received from first-generation applicants has not meaningfully increased, potentially signaling an opportunity to increase access and remove barriers for these students.

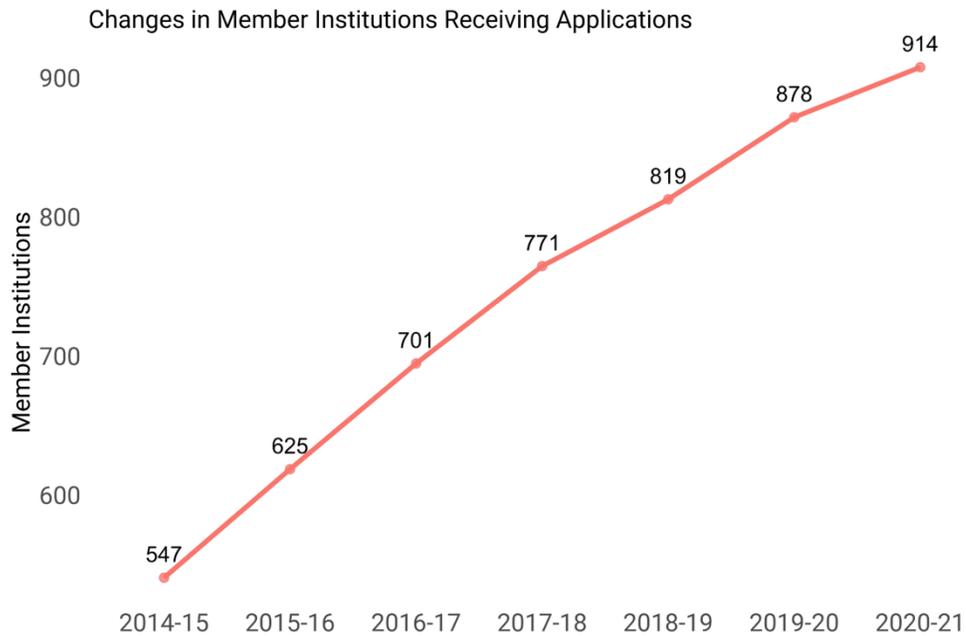
³ Information on definitions and classification from The U.S. Department of Education is available [here](#).

⁴ 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 growth in Common App membership

The seven-year period from 2014–15 to 2020–21 marked the largest expansion in membership in Common App’s history. As we highlight in **Figure 1**, the number of member institutions increased from 547 in 2014–15 to 914 in 2020–21 (+67%).

Figure 1: Common App membership increased dramatically since 2014–15.



Changes in the characteristics of member institutions

Common App began as a small group of private, selective institutions. The organization implemented several changes over the next 45 years, including inviting public institutions to join the membership in 2000; opening membership to all not-for-profit, accredited, undergraduate degree-granting institutions in 2014; and most recently launching an MSI membership recruitment initiative. As a result of these efforts, the profile of member characteristics has changed significantly over time.

We present in **Figure 2** a graph of year-over-year changes in the composition of Common App member institutions. This graph highlights increases in the share of public institutions, as well as in the shares of institutions by geographic region. Specifically, just 15% of Common App members were public institutions in 2014–15. This share increased to 24% in 2020–21. Over the same period, the share of members in the Southern region of the United States grew from 13% to 17% while the share of members in the Midwestern region rose from 18% to 25%.

Figure 2: New Common App members were increasingly public, geographically diverse

Changes in the Composition of Member Institutions, by Season



As the Common App membership expanded to reach more public institutions across the United States, it also grew to include larger and less selective institutions. As we highlight in **Figure 3**, the percentage of institutions enrolling at least 10,000 total (undergraduate + graduate) students increased from 16% in 2014–15 to 21% in 2020–21. The graph also shows that the share of

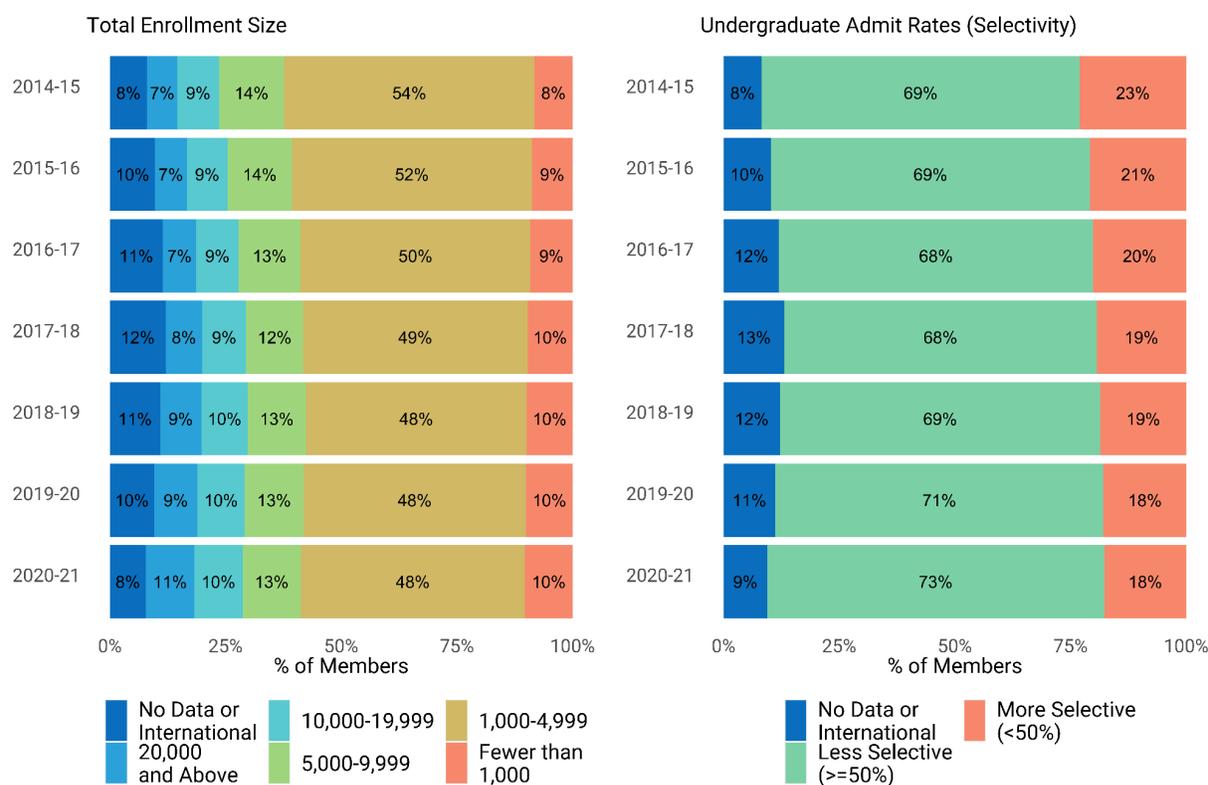
Long-term trends in Common App membership

October 19, 2021

more selective institutions (undergraduate admit rates below 50%, as reported in IPEDS) decreased from 23% in 2014–15 to 18% in 2020–21. Meanwhile, the share of less selective institutions in the Common App membership rose to 73% in 2020–21 from 69% in 2014–15.

Figure 3: Common App membership grew to include larger, less selective institutions

Changes in the Composition of Member Institutions, by Season

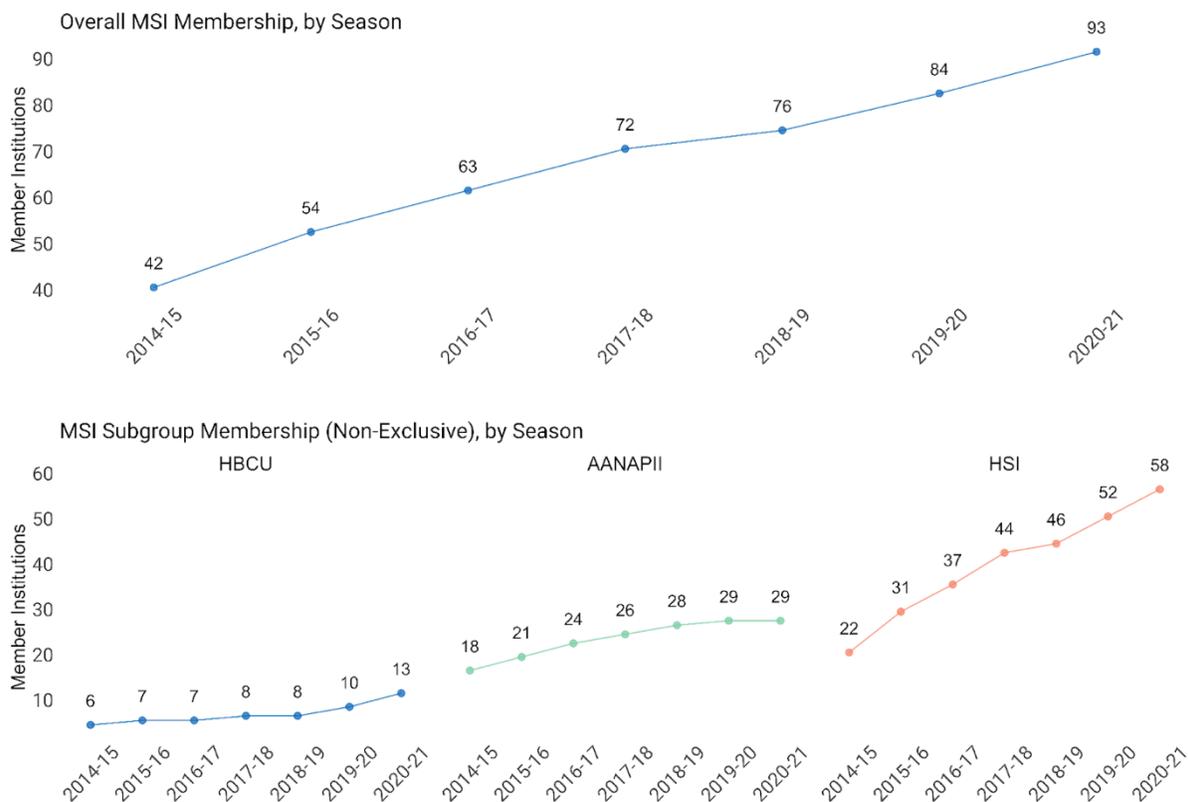


The first three figures in this brief highlighted the extent to which the Common App membership has both grown and diversified over the past seven years. One particularly meaningful change not reflected in the above analyses, however, is Common App's shift toward recruiting and enrolling more colleges and universities federally designated as Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). In recent years, Common App has prioritized recruitment of MSIs, which include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Primarily Black Institutions (PBIs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges or Universities (TCUs), Native American Non-Tribal Institutions (NANTIs), Alaskan Native- or Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions (ANNHIs), and Asian American- and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPIIs) (see footnote 1 in Introduction).

We present **Figure 4** to highlight overall growth in Common App MSI membership as well as in the three largest member MSI subcategories. In 2014–15, there were 42 member MSIs, over half (22) of which were HSIs, 18 of which were AANAPIIs, and six of which were HBCUs. By 2020–21, the total number of member MSIs more than doubled to 93. The number of member

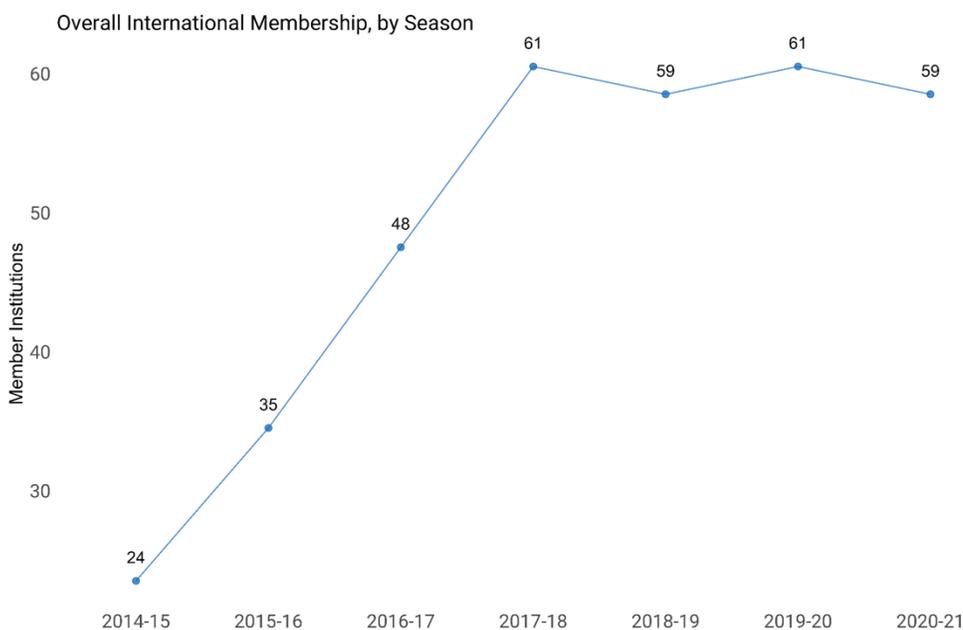
HSIs increased more than any other subgroup, reaching 58 by 2020–21. The numbers of member AANAPIIs and HBCUs grew to 29 and 13, respectively, by 2020–21.

Figure 4: MSI membership doubled since 2014–15, with largest growth among HSIs



The expansion in Common App membership was not confined to the borders of the United States. Between 2014–15 and 2020–21, institutions from countries across the world, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, Spain, Germany, France, China, Switzerland, and others joined the Common App. As we present in **Figure 5**, the number of international members increased from 24 in 2014–15 to 59 in 2020–21. Much of this growth occurred between 2014–15 and 2017–18, during which time the number of international member institutions more than doubled.

Figure 5: International membership increased dramatically between 2014–15 and 2017–18



Changes in the diversity of member applicant pools

One of the goals of expanding membership to include a more diverse set of institutions is to increase access for a more diverse group of students. To assess the degree to which the diversity of member applicant pools changed as the Common App membership expanded between 2014–15 and 2020–21, we explore trends in the representation of first-generation and underrepresented minority (URM) applicants in members’ applicant pools.

In **Figure 6**, we visualize the distribution of the shares of URM and first-generation applicants in each member’s first-year application pool, in each season from 2014–15 to 2020–21. We show, in the left-hand side of **Figure 6**, that the majority of members, in each season, received between 20–40% of their applications from URM applicants. However, the distribution shifted to the right (see the growing “bumps” on the right-hand side of each season’s distribution) in each season. In 2014–15, the typical member received about 26% of its applications from URM applicants (see vertical line and percentage label in chart). By 2019–20, this percentage had risen to 31%. The positive trend reversed somewhat during the 2020–21 season, reflecting the challenges facing underrepresented students that have been [well documented](#) during the pandemic.

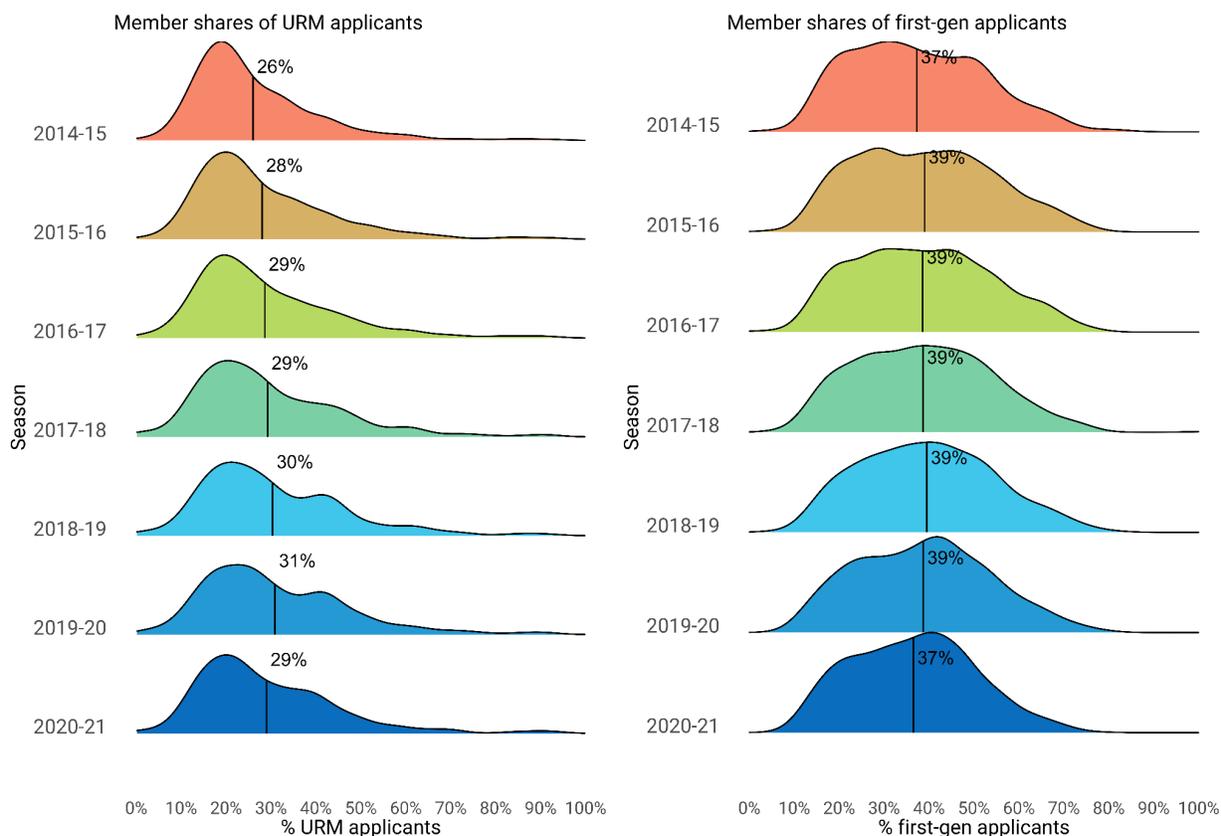
Observing the graph on the right-hand side of **Figure 6**, we find limited evidence that members received significantly larger shares of applications, on average, from first-generation applicants in the seasons following 2014–15. Between 2014–15 and 2019–20, the average member received between 37% and 39% of its applications from first-generation applicants. During the first full application season of the pandemic, this average fell back to 37%.

Long-term trends in Common App membership

October 19, 2021

Figure 6: Representation of URM applicants grew until 2020–21, first-generation representation changed very little (first-year applicants only)

Changes in diversity of member applicant pools, by season



Note: Labels reflect mean applicant share by season.

Conclusion

The size of the Common App membership increased from just 15 member institutions at the time of its founding in 1975 to over 900 in the 2020-21 season. Within this long period of growth, the most dramatic expansion in the organization's history occurred from 2014-15 through 2020-21. In this time, the number of total member institutions grew by 67%. The organization expanded to include a more representative set of institutions, including more large, public colleges and universities, more institutions across the South and the Midwest, and institutions with less selective admissions practices. Of particular note was the growth in member MSIs, which more than doubled from 42 in 2014–15 to 93 in 2020–21. Finally, we find some evidence that, as the population of member institutions grew more diverse, so, too, did the overall diversity of the applicants applying to college via the Common App. Until the COVID-19 pandemic upended college admissions last season, the share of URM applicants in the typical member's first-year applicant pool had increased nearly every year since 2014–15.

Most recently, in the 2021–22 application season, Common App welcomed an additional [60 colleges and universities](#) to its membership. As Common App continues its expansion efforts,

Long-term trends in Common App membership

October 19, 2021

we are prioritizing recruitment of institutions that align with our commitment to promoting higher education access and success, particularly for underrepresented students. We have recently welcomed several new member MSIs to Common App and are actively working to reduce barriers facing students in the college admissions process through our [Evolving the Application \(ETA\)](#) initiative. In the coming year and beyond, we will continue to monitor our progress in these initiatives as it relates to increasing the representation of applicants from historically underrepresented subgroups. As this report has revealed limited progress in increasing representation of first-generation students, we will also consider new innovations in our work to ensure all students have the opportunity to access and succeed in college.