Deadline update:
trends through November 16

November 23, 2021

Authors

Data Analytics and Research

Mark Freeman
Brian Heseung Kim
Preston Magouirk
Trent Kajikawa

Press inquiries

Emma Steele

esteele@commonapp.org

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.

Throughout this application season, the Data Analytics and Research team at Common App will provide timely insights and clarify trends in application behavior from the largest, most comprehensive source of application data available in U.S. higher education. We will release these “Deadline update” reports monthly, to coincide with major application deadlines, with the goal of providing accessible and detailed insights on emerging trends in our application data.

Note: Each update in this series highlights year-over-year application activity for first-year applicants through a specific date (in this case, November 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 restricted to members that have been continuously active since 2019–20.

Contents

Key findings

1. Prior analyses of the 2020–21 season showed delayed application activity in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our examination of the current 2021–22 season revealed large increases over both the sluggish start to 2020–21 and the more typical start to 2019–20. Through November 16, 2021, 780,024 distinct applicants had applied to 853 returning members, an increase of 13% over 2019–20 (687,812). Application volume through November 16, 2021 rose 22% from 2019–20 (2,534,127) to 2021–22 (3,089,107), following a slow start in 2020–21 (2,630,879).

2. Last season, we sounded the alarm in response to troublingly low application activity among first-generation and fee waiver-receiving applicants. Through November 16 of 2020, totals for these applicant groups had declined relative to 2019–20. This season, we observed a 22% increase in the number of first-generation applicants relative to 2019–20, with first-generation applicants comprising a larger overall share of the applicant pool (27%) than in any prior season (through November 16).

3. About 60% of domestic applicants resided in the most affluent quintile (i.e., top 20th percentile) of zip codes nationwide. Applicants from the bottom quintile comprised about 5% of the applicant pool, in line with prior years' trends through this date.

4. The number of international applicants continued to increase relative to prior seasons. Through November 16, the number of international applicants (62,291) was up 40% over the 2019–20 total. China, India, Canada, South Korea, and Nigeria were among the leading home countries for international applicants.

5. Test-optional policies, and applicants' test score reporting practices, were a major focus during last season. This season, the share of members requiring test scores decreased to 5% after reaching an historic low of 11% in 2020–21. The share of applicants reporting test scores to Common App, after declining significantly from 2019–20 (80%) to 2020–21 (49%), increased to 53% this season. 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.
    - Among the least likely to report test scores in 2021–22 were first-generation, Common App fee waiver-receiving, underrepresented minority[1] (URM), and female applicants. Students from lower-income communities were also less likely to report scores than their peers from more affluent communities.

6. Applications to public members drove most of the overall increases in total volume. The number of applications to public members increased 28% from 2019–20 (relative to 15% for private members). Undergraduate selectivity was a strong predictor of growth in application volume for private members, but not for public members.

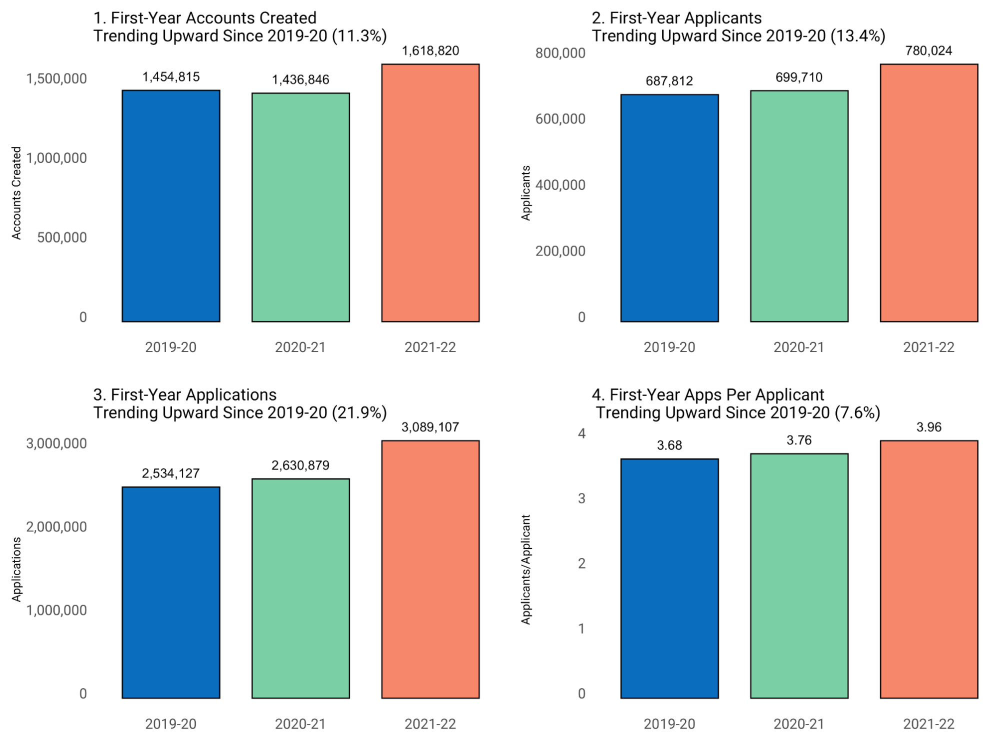
---

[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 November 16, the numbers of accounts created by high school seniors (+11%), applicants (+13%), applications (+22%), and applications per applicant (+8%) each increased from 2019–20. **Figures 1–4** reveal year-over-year trends in each category across three seasons.

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



Applicant subgroup trends

Last season, through November 16, we observed surprisingly low applicant totals for multiple underrepresented student subgroups, including both first-generation applicants and applicants receiving a Common App fee waiver. As a result, we sounded the alarm on these trends by keeping them at the forefront of our internal monitoring and external communications.

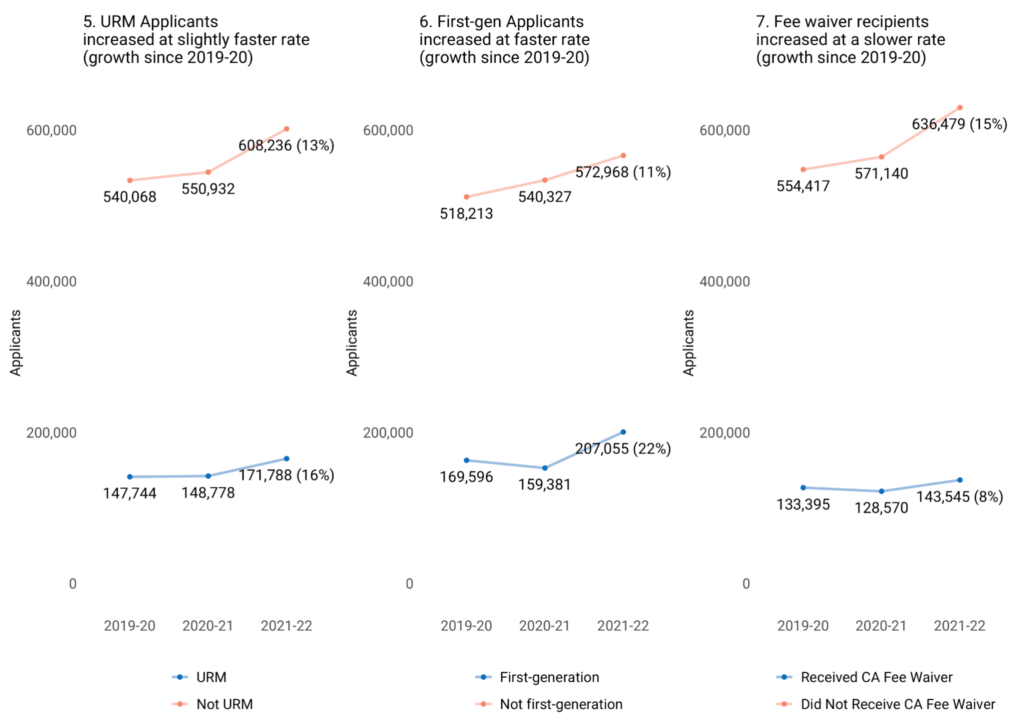
This season, we observed large year-over-year increases among applicants from these subgroups relative to both 2019–20 and 2020–21. These increases likely reflect a combination of factors, including, a) returns to in-person schooling, b) renewed contact with school counselors, c) broader day-to-day stability than was present during the early months of the pandemic.

Figures 5–7 below showcase applicant trends by URM, first-generation, and Common App fee waiver recipient status. 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 over 170,000. This marked a 16% increase over the 2019–20 (pre-pandemic) total through November 16. This increase was greater than that for non-URM applicants (+13%).

Figure 6 highlights the dramatic increase in the number of first-generation applicants (+22%), double the rate of annual increase for non-first-generation applicants (+11%). The overall share of first-generation applicants through November 16 reached its highest level on record this season (27%, compared to 23% in 2020–21 and 25% in 2019–20).

Finally, as shown in **Figure 7**, we observed just a small increase in the number of applicants applying with a Common App fee waiver since 2019–20 (+8%). This was roughly half the increase observed in applicants not receiving such a fee waiver (+15%). 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 waivers.

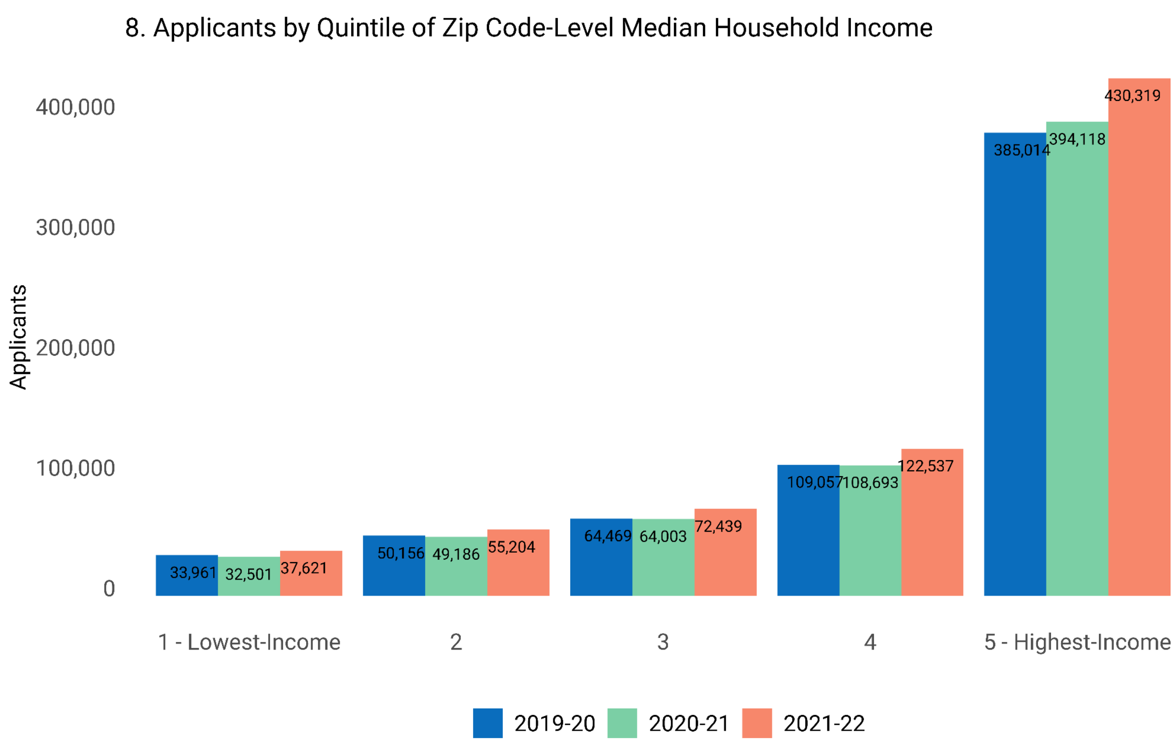
Figures 5–7: Applicant totals increased across underrepresented subgroups



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 five quintiles, where quintile one comprised the 20% of zip codes with the lowest median household incomes, and quintile five represented the 20% of zip codes with the highest median household incomes in the United States.

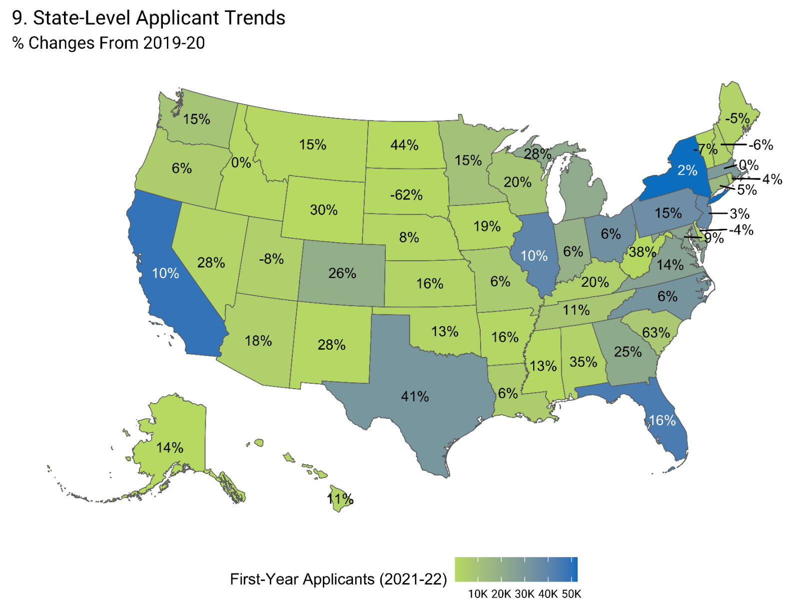
In **Figure 8,** we present trends in domestic applicant totals by median household income quintile. We observed three compelling findings. First, a majority (60%) of applicants resided in the top income quintile (20%). Second, just five percent of the applicant pool resided in the bottom quintile. Finally, we observed that, while the number of applicants in every quintile increased from 2019–20, only applicants in the most affluent quintile (5) demonstrated an increase in applicant totals from 2019–20 to 2020–21 (in the early months of the pandemic). These trends clearly signal that more work is necessary to effectively engage and support students from across the country's diverse communities in the college admissions process.

Figure 8: 60% of applicants resided in the country's most affluent zip codes



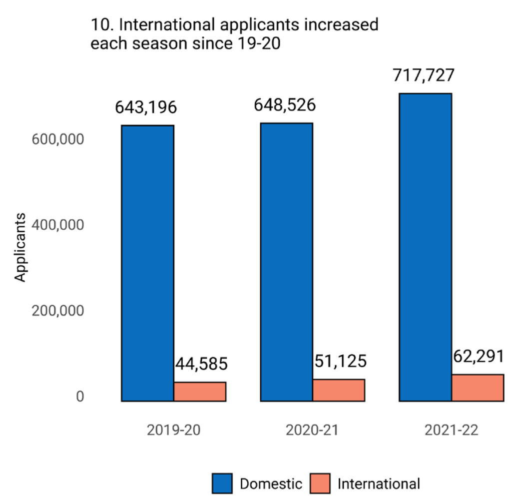
We also observed meaningful variation in applicant trends across states. The map of the United States in **Figure 9** is colored to reflect overall applicant totals in 2021–22, while the labels reflect percentage increases since 2019–20. The map indicates that the states with the largest numbers of applicants were in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast regions, in addition to California, Texas, Illinois, and Florida (indicated by the blue fill), while the states observing the largest increases in applicants were typically in the Southwest and Southeast regions.

Figure 9: Largest % increases in US applicant totals came from Southwest, Southeast



In addition to percentage increases in domestic applicants, Common App also observed large increases in international applicants. **Figure 10** presents a graph of applicant totals, grouped by domestic or international residence and season. We found that the number of applicants increased each year, even as the number of domestic applicants lagged behind last season. The top five home countries included China, India, Canada, South Korea, and Nigeria.

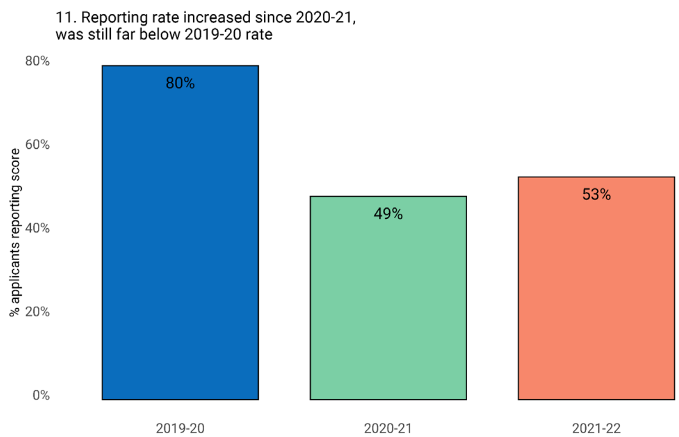
Figure 10. Despite stagnation in 2020–21 for domestic applicants, international applicants increased



Trends in test score reporting

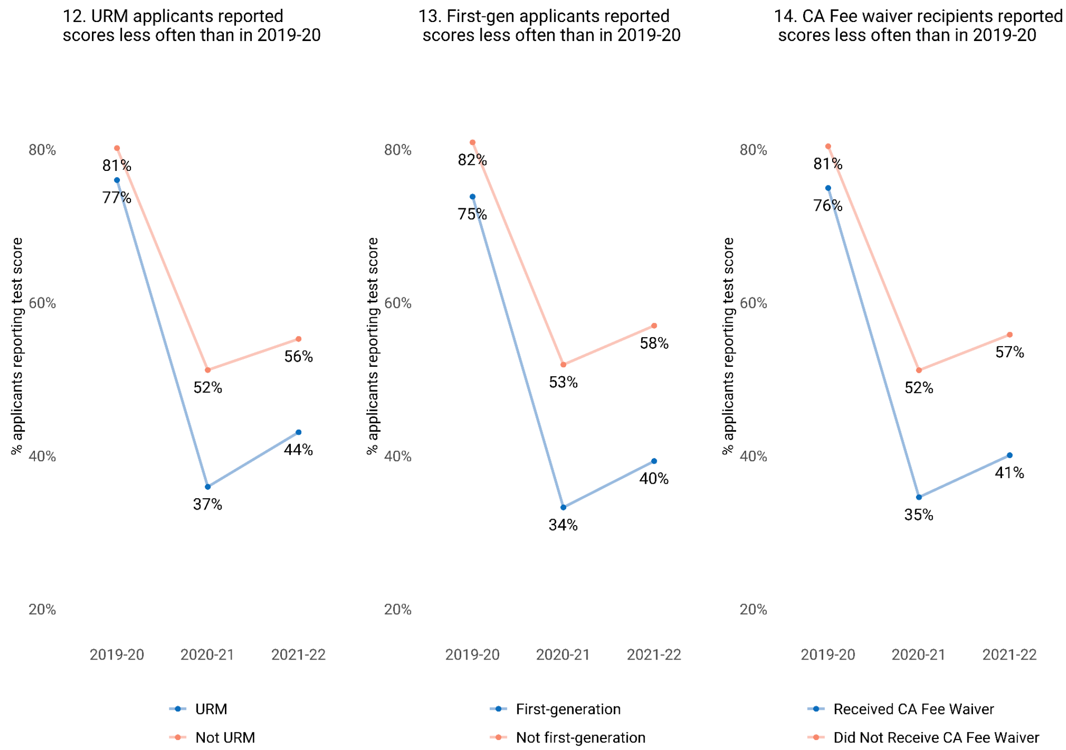
In 2019–20, about 55% of Common App members always required standardized test scores, while the remainder used some type of test-optional or test-flexible policy. In 2020–21, this share fell to 11%, and then fell again to just 5% in 2021–22. Last season, as we observed this move away from requiring test scores during the height of the pandemic, we observed sharp decreases in the share of applicants reporting test scores, as shown in **Figure 11**.
This season, however, 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. After a dramatic decline in 2020–21, the reporting rate increased this season



Similar to last season, we also saw major disparities in test score reporting rates across subgroups. We observed that URM, first-gen, and fee waiver-receiving applicants were significantly less likely to report test scores than their non-URM, non-first-generation, and non-fee-waiver-receiving peers as shown in **Figures 12–14**. We also found that female applicants were significantly less likely to report scores than their male peers (see **Figure A1** in the appendix).

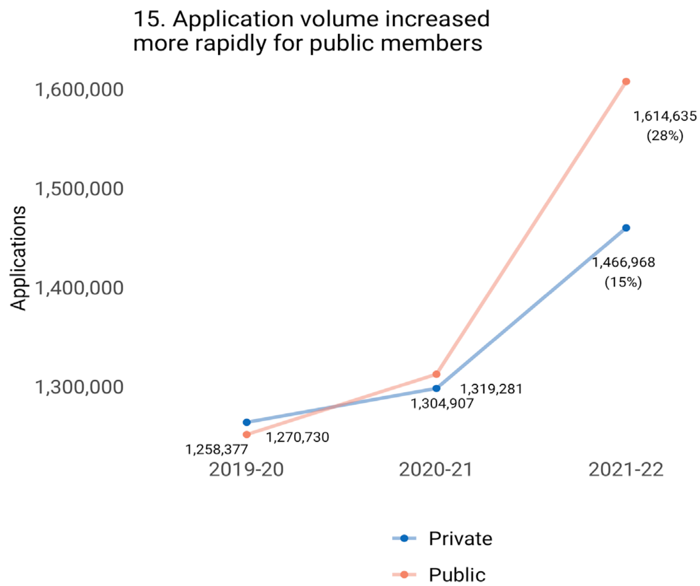
Figures 12–14. Reporting rates varied meaningfully across subgroups



Trends by member characteristics

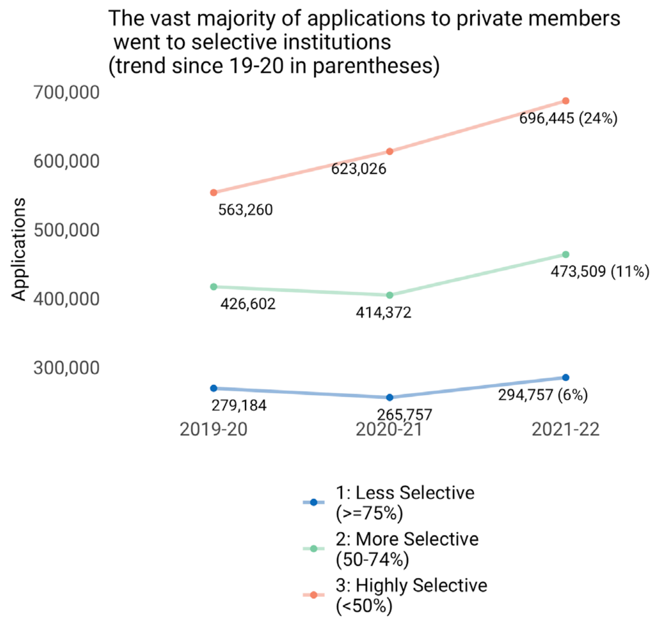
This majority of applications submitted through November 16 went to public members. This increase (+28% since 2019–20) was significantly larger than the increase for private members. **Figure 15** highlights year-over-year trends in applications by institutional type. In 2019–20 and 2020–21, the shares of public and private applications were roughly equal. This season, the share of public member applications greatly exceeded that of private members.

Figure 15. Applications to public members were off to a fast start in 2021–22



Selectivity was a meaningful predictor for application trends among private members, but not at all among public members. **Figure 16** presents trends in application volume by member selectivity for private members, as measured by undergraduate admit rates reported in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). We observed that the majority of applications to private members were submitted to more selective (admit rates between 50 and 74%) or highly selective (admit rates below 50%) institutions. We also found that highly selective members saw over twice the increase in applications since 2019–20 than more selective and less selective institutions (admit rates at or above 75%) (24% vs. 11% and 6%, respectively). Highly selective institutions were the only subgroup of private members who did not see a decline in applications between 2019–20 and 2020–21. Note: members with no selectivity data were omitted from these analyses.
To support members' efforts to benchmark what they are observing against broader trends, we also provide tables of application trends by member characteristics in the appendix (**Tables A1-A4**).

Figure 16. Selectivity predicted application increases for private members



Conclusion

Through the first wave of applications, which were largely submitted for early action and early decision deadlines, we saw meaningful year-over-year increases in the share of first-generation applicants. We also saw that, in each season since 2019–20, the majority of applicants to these deadlines resided in the nation's most affluent communities. In a forthcoming research brief, due for release in early December, we will provide further analysis of the associations between applicant characteristics and the timing of the deadlines for which they apply. As future early and regular deadlines pass, 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. Test score reporting rates varied by legal sex

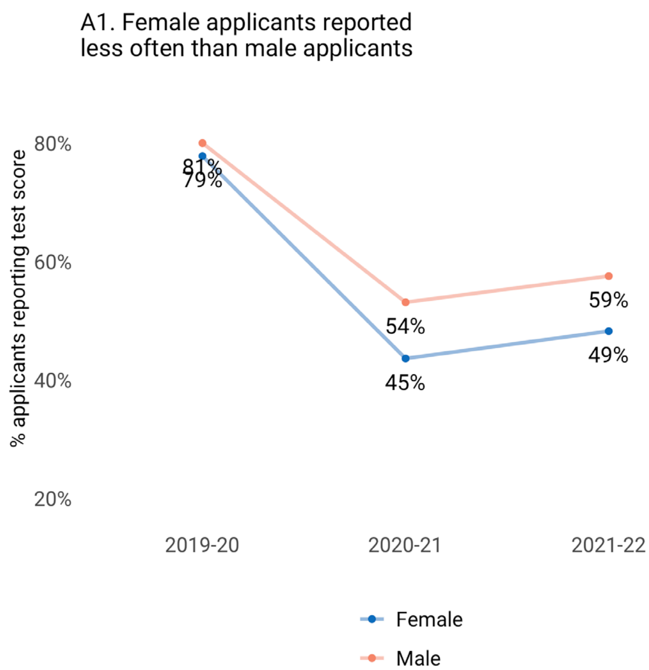


Table A1. Application trends by member region, institutional control[2]

	Private			Public		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Mid-Atlantic	380,119	376,564	417,690	219,968	219,868	267,679
Midwestern	258,009	258,921	292,871	385,975	413,516	491,908
New England	229,678	235,916	269,745	112,957	104,815	133,256
Southern	229,869	246,134	285,733	410,263	427,770	541,503
Southwestern	39,944	45,246	53,824	16,732	22,246	29,637
Western	132,930	141,864	146,796	112,482	131,066	150,653

Note:

Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.

Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

[2] Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

Table A2. Application trends by member state, institutional control[3]

	Private			Public		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
California	80,334	85,250	85,552	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	46,446	46,051	48,093	19,847	17,234	28,974
District of Columbia	25,413	26,406	22,569	NA	NA	NA
Florida	71,556	73,773	99,058	132,930	118,541	175,909
Georgia	32,340	34,366	38,358	NA	NA	NA
Illinois	76,167	72,006	80,421	NA	NA	NA
Indiana	41,638	41,511	44,676	77,303	79,200	91,794
Iowa	7,708	7,145	9,255	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	3,812	4,214	4,675	NA	NA	NA
Louisiana	31,282	32,396	29,552	NA	NA	NA
Maine	9,083	8,539	10,052	9,506	7,686	9,395
Maryland	21,529	21,678	21,221	16,170	14,796	15,269
Massachusetts	127,373	138,737	163,374	43,156	39,243	45,838
Michigan	13,997	15,082	18,802	87,713	108,094	126,727
Minnesota	14,241	17,734	19,628	19,751	18,404	21,875
Missouri	13,713	13,878	15,477	14,207	14,168	16,333
New Hampshire	11,285	10,294	11,227	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	34,288	25,736	36,353	24,239	17,993	22,237
New York	175,479	175,433	199,848	69,827	60,398	74,746
North Carolina	37,278	40,700	47,156	108,744	117,383	133,283
Ohio	66,582	67,522	77,127	110,132	114,429	138,663
Oregon	15,260	14,685	16,075	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	123,376	127,311	137,648	87,621	105,330	131,963
Rhode Island	30,320	27,608	30,392	NA	NA	NA
South Carolina	6,203	8,472	10,103	NA	NA	NA
Tennessee	22,641	24,401	25,076	NA	NA	NA
Texas	36,865	42,522	50,218	NA	NA	NA
Vermont	5,171	4,687	6,607	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	21,149	24,454	27,992	63,260	66,530	73,064
Washington	14,796	16,195	16,183	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	18,555	18,578	21,001	NA	NA	NA

Note:
Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.
Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

[3] Cells with fewer than 5 members are omitted. Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

Table A3. Application trends by member region, member selectivity grouping (undergraduates admitted as a percent of applications)[4]

	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	156,037	165,389	186,814	242,091	222,913	271,630	201,173	207,199	225,796
Midwestern	217,934	216,845	260,786	315,433	327,823	385,530	109,592	126,561	136,686
New England	90,851	78,403	91,164	112,878	105,907	128,582	138,492	156,035	182,754
Southern	147,092	152,262	189,581	168,796	175,712	212,678	323,754	345,462	424,202
Southwestern	12,479	16,376	21,639	8,239	9,925	12,987	35,913	41,143	48,798
Western	128,120	148,875	166,105	63,921	61,712	68,086	53,083	62,020	62,936

Note:

Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.

Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

[4] Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

Table A4. Application trends by member state, member selectivity grouping (undergraduates admitted as a percent of applications)[5]

	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	5,108	4,386	4,900	28,304	26,208	26,173	46,634	54,333	54,157
Colorado	52,462	63,724	67,630	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	11,143	9,841	10,931	31,684	28,008	34,396	23,466	25,436	31,740
Florida	NA	NA	NA	54,137	50,039	68,217	142,511	134,807	196,698
Georgia	17,307	14,390	20,366	12,906	13,399	15,371	37,499	45,734	51,082
Illinois	NA	NA	NA	59,754	55,710	65,538	25,886	24,563	25,974
Indiana	48,931	48,826	53,727	61,763	62,823	71,368	NA	NA	NA
Iowa	14,398	14,050	20,529	5,109	5,136	6,003	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	9,385	9,494	11,826	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maine	12,913	10,833	13,236	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maryland	15,458	14,558	14,822	17,518	16,279	15,960	NA	NA	NA
Massachusetts	31,655	28,051	32,577	49,186	45,946	53,673	89,642	103,937	122,934
Michigan	16,066	17,313	25,049	41,699	49,234	63,031	NA	NA	NA
Minnesota	7,656	7,651	8,372	23,454	21,789	25,752	NA	NA	NA
Missouri	12,774	13,396	15,497	10,302	9,808	11,307	NA	NA	NA
New Hampshire	22,587	19,316	22,137	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	14,524	11,508	14,678	29,663	24,514	31,392	NA	NA	NA
New York	33,493	33,067	36,645	92,461	78,136	96,955	119,352	124,628	140,994
North Carolina	41,714	44,146	50,355	38,975	40,846	46,923	65,333	73,091	83,161
Ohio	81,384	78,838	96,443	71,701	78,445	89,719	23,188	24,284	29,219
Oregon	28,697	32,045	36,724	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	87,989	102,233	116,671	80,338	82,633	103,859	41,884	46,844	47,952
Texas	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	34,351	39,967	46,892
Vermont	4,038	3,082	4,785	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	32,001	30,485	33,757	11,142	10,501	12,240	41,266	49,998	55,059
Washington	11,172	12,089	11,637	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	12,106	12,379	13,328	36,879	40,143	47,380	NA	NA	NA

Note:

Cells with fewer than five members are omitted.

Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.

[5] Cells with fewer than five members are omitted. Members without available IPEDS data are omitted.