Deadline update: first-year application trends through February 15

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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 third release in the 2021–22 "Deadline Update" series at Common App — 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-January here, mid-December here, and mid-November here. We will continue to release these reports monthly through March 2022, to coincide with major application deadlines across our membership and to 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, February 15). Since fall 2020 trends were anomalous due to the global pandemic, this year 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 hereafter as "returning members").

Contents

Key findings

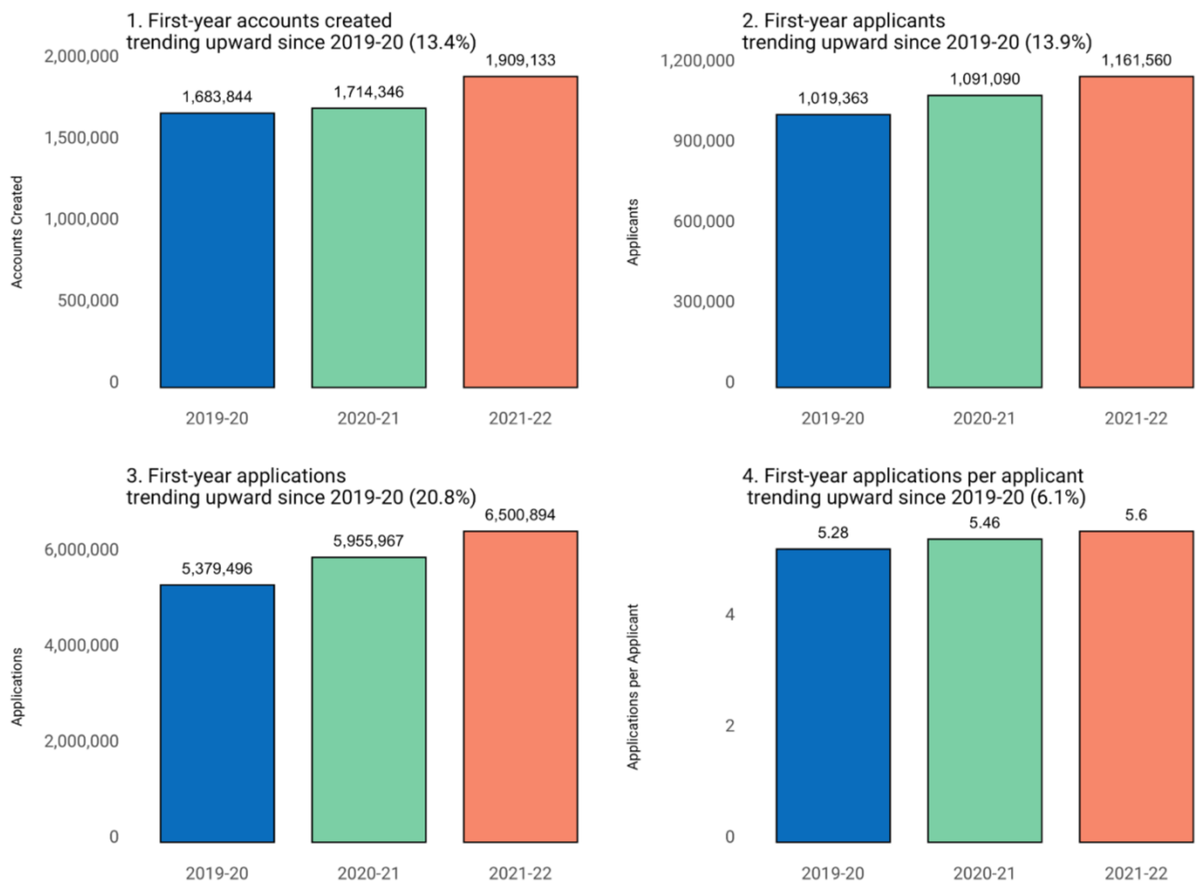
1. In general, the trends surfaced in our January deadline update remain consistent in cumulative application activity through mid-February application deadlines.
2. Through February 15, 2022, 1,161,560 distinct first-year applicants had applied to 853 returning members (an increase of 13.9% from 1,019,363 in 2019–20).
3. Total application volume through February 15 rose 20.8% from 2019–20 (5,379,496) to 2021–22 (6,500,894). Applicants are applying to more members, on average, in 2021–22 than in 2019–20 (+6.1% from 5.46 to 5.60 applications per applicant).
4. Relatively large increases in underrepresented minority (URM)[1] and first-generation ("first-gen") applicants highlighted in our December report persisted through January: URM applicants increased by 17% over 2019–20, while first-gen applicants increased by 21%. Indeed, first-gen applicants increased at nearly twice the rate of continuing-gen applicants over the same period.
5. About 56% of domestic applicants at this point in the season resided in the most affluent quintile (i.e., top 20%) of ZIP codes nationwide. Applicants from the bottom quintile comprised six percent of the applicant pool. These trends were similar to those observed in prior years.
6. Geographically, growth in applicants was positive across all regions except for New England and the Mid-Atlantic.
7. The number of distinct international applicants has increased at nearly triple the rate of domestic applicants since 2019–20 (33% versus 12%). China, India, Canada, Pakistan, and Nigeria were the leading home countries for international applicants.
8. As previously reported, the share of members requiring test scores decreased further in 2021–22 to five percent 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) reported in the previous months' Deadline Updates persisted through the mid-February deadlines.
9. Nearly 60% of applications received through this point in the season went to private members. However, public members saw stronger growth in application volume since 2019–20 (+25%, relative to +18% for private members). Highly selective members experienced larger increases in application volume over 2019–20 than less selective 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 February 15, the overall numbers of accounts created by high school seniors (+13.4%), applicant counts (+13.9%), total applications (+20.8%), and applications per applicant (+6.1%) each increased from 2019–20. The magnitudes of these trends are all generally consistent with what we found during the previous months' reports. **Figures 1–4** display year-over-year trends in each category across the three most recent seasons.

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

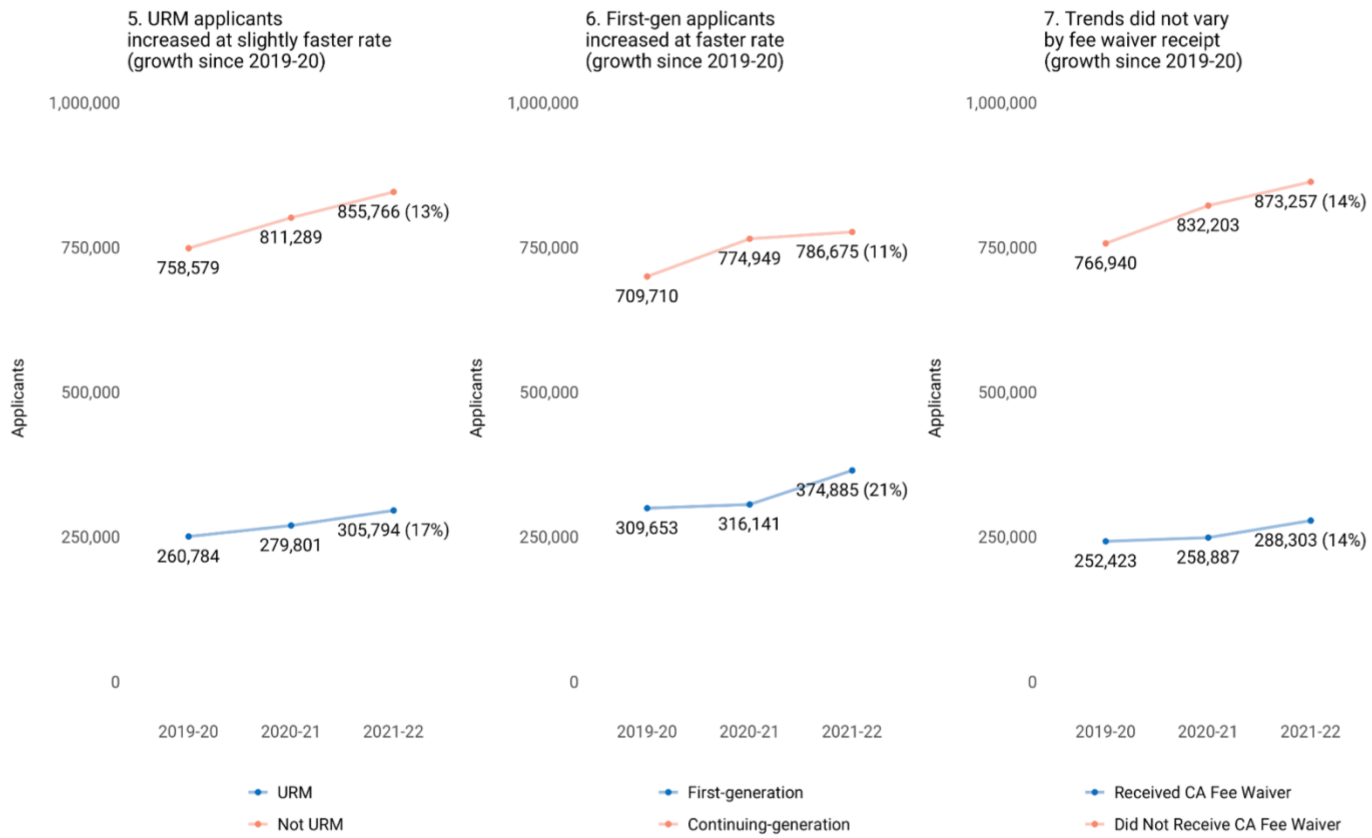


Applicant subgroup trends

Consistent with the results from our previous reports, applicant growth among underrepresented subgroups has 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.

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



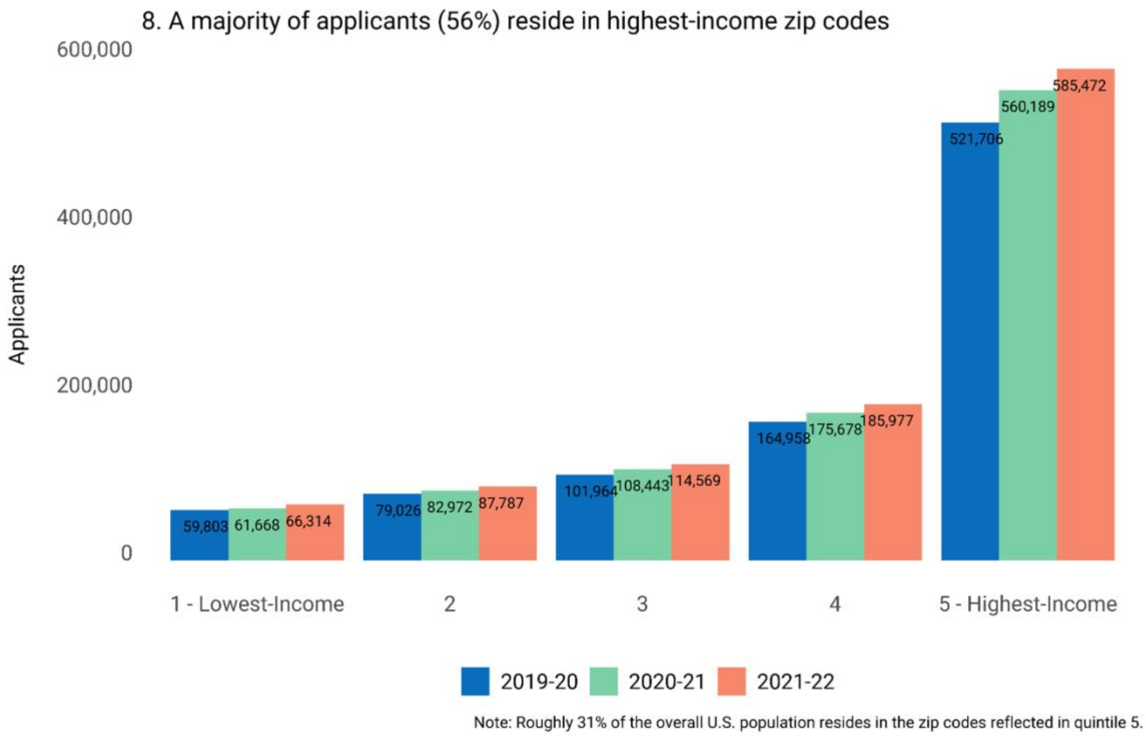
We show in **Figure 5** that, after a smaller increase from 2019–20 to 2020–21, the number of URM applicants rose significantly this season, to nearly 306,000. This marked a 17% increase over the 2019–20 (pre-pandemic) total through February 15. This increase was greater than that for non-URM applicants across the same time period (+13%), indicating growing diversification of our applicant pool along this dimension.

Figure 6 highlights the dramatic rate of increase in the number of first-generation applicants (+21%), which was roughly double that for continuing-generation applicants (+11%) since 2019–20. The significant growth here is especially encouraging for Common App as we pursue our mission of promoting access for underrepresented students.

Finally, as shown in **Figure 7**, we observe an increase in the number of applicants applying with a Common App fee waiver since 2019–20 (+14%) — the same as that observed in applicants not receiving such a fee waiver. It is important to note here that the total number of applications submitted either by applicants with a member fee waiver or to members with no application fee increased dramatically since 2019–20 (not pictured; each over 30%). Therefore, slow growth in applicants requesting fee waivers is likely attributable, at least in part, to the fact that fewer members require them now than in prior years.

To develop a clearer understanding of the socioeconomic characteristics of 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 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 (56%) 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 December and January updates, indicating that applicants submitting to this later set of deadlines were not, in general, more socioeconomically diverse than those submitting in prior months. Despite the increased rate of growth for first-gen and URM applicants, we find growth is more evenly distributed among applicants' communities at this point.

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 continue to observe meaningful variation in applicant trends across states. The map of the United States in **Figure 9** is colored to reflect overall (absolute) applicant totals in 2021–22, while the labels reflect percentage change since 2019–20. As with our reporting in prior months, we see growth is more evenly spread across the country — except for the Northeast. Looking at state-by-state growth, we see many states saw growth in the neighborhood of 10–20% with a few notable exceptions. South Carolina saw by far the greatest growth of 61% over

2019–20, followed by Texas at 40%. The lone outlier, South Dakota, is a state with historically low applicant volume. We will continue to monitor applicant and application trends in this state.

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

9. Applicant growth generally strong everywhere except northeast

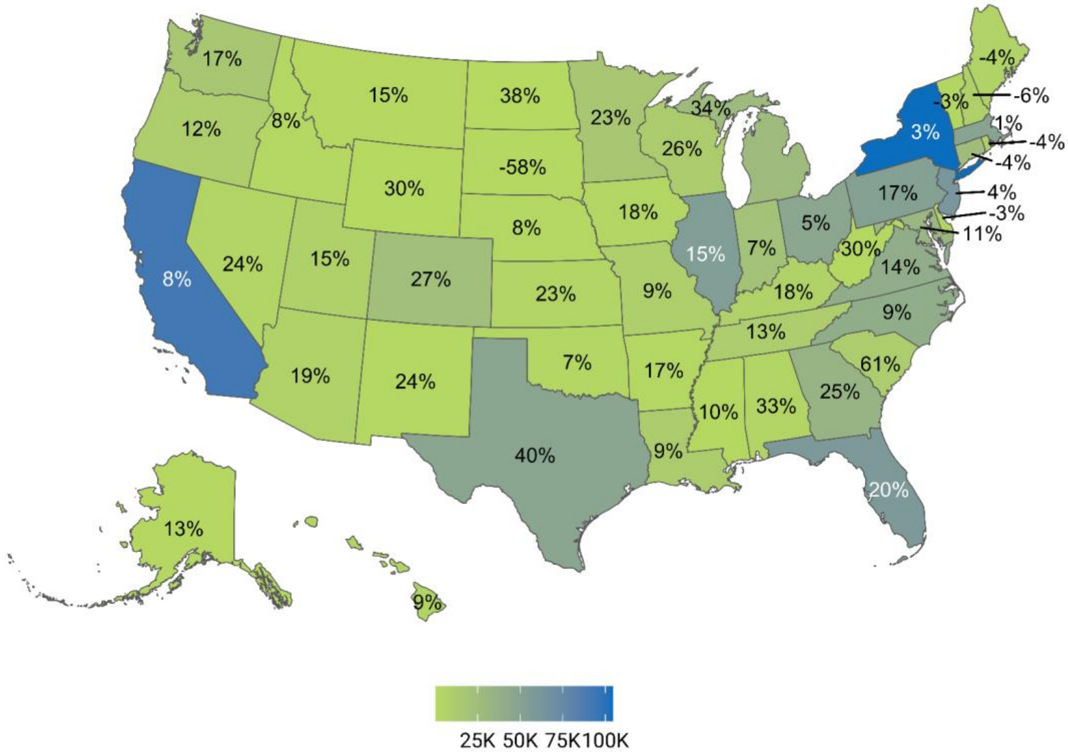
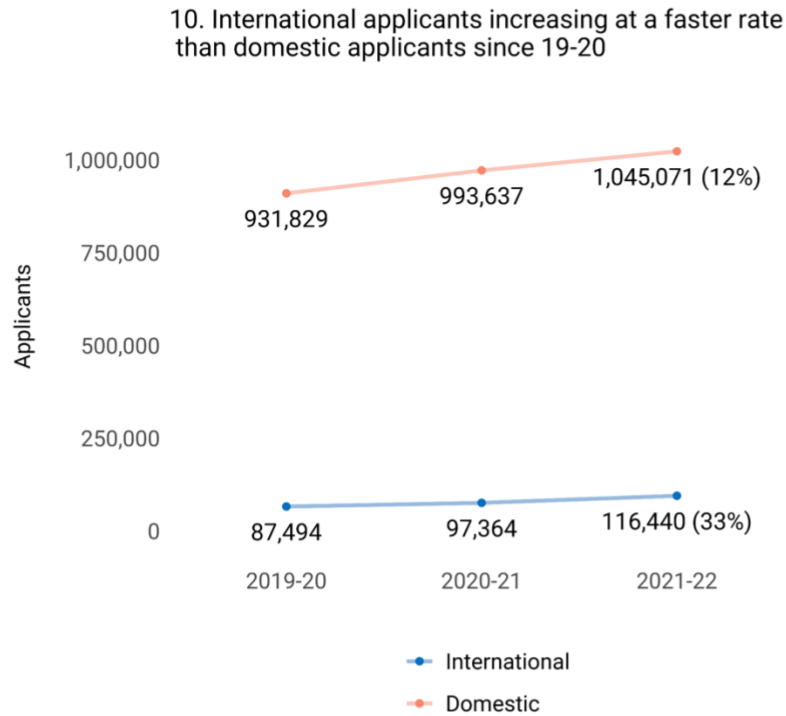


Figure 10 presents a graph of applicant totals, grouped by domestic/international residence and season. We observe that the number of applicants in both categories increased each year, though the rate of growth for international applicants since 2019–20 (33%) nearly tripled that for domestic applicants (12%). The top 5 home countries, in order, were China, India, Canada, Pakistan, and Nigeria.

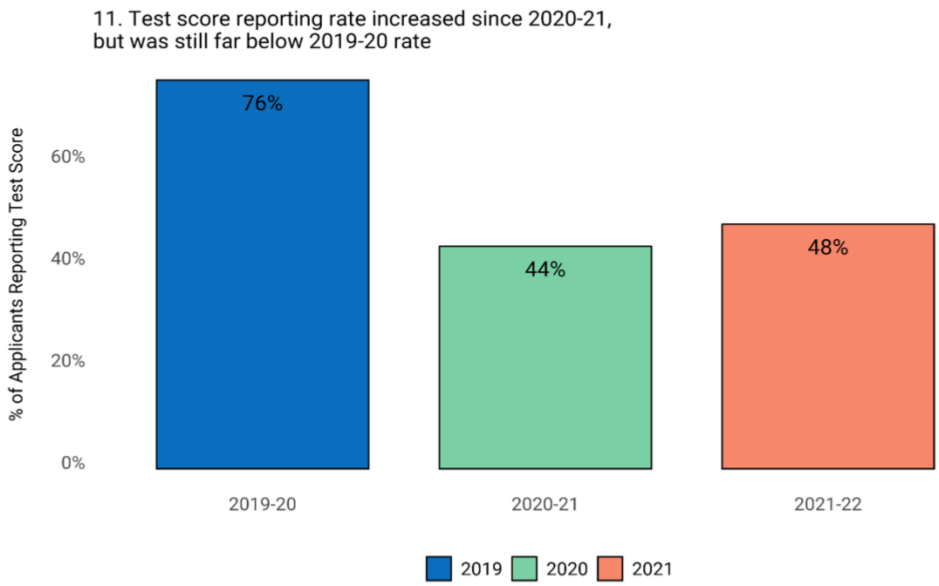
Figure 10. International and domestic applicants since 2019–20



Trends in test score reporting

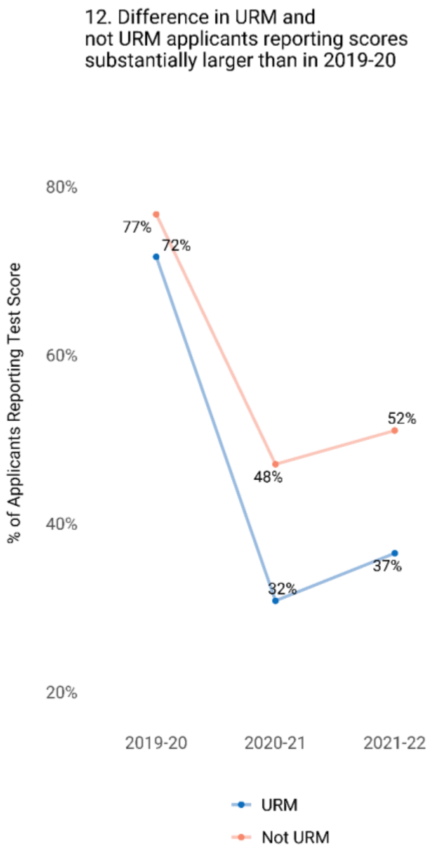
As we've reported in the past, the share of Common App members requiring standardized test scores since 2019–20 has decreased dramatically — from about 55% to just 5% in 2021–22. Given this dynamic, we continue to report on patterns of test score submission among applicants over the course of the season. In **Figure 11**, we show that trends surfaced in the previous updates 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, likely reflects better access to testing sites relative to (see previous research) the early months of the pandemic (Spring and Summer of 2020).

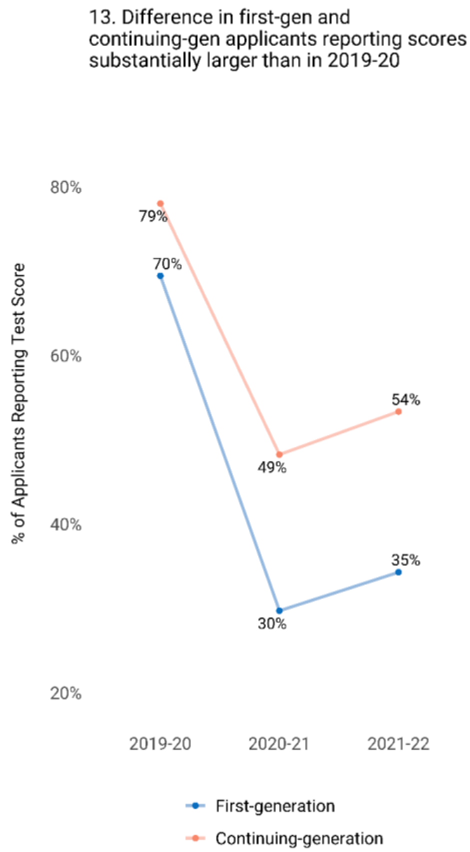
Figure 11. Test score reporting rates since 2019–20

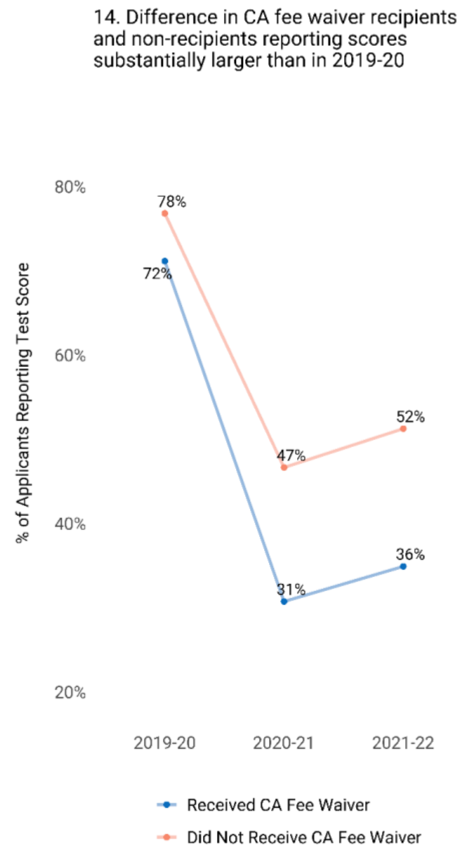


But even as test score reporting, in general, has increased since 2020–21, the disparities in test score reporting rates across student demographic groups that surfaced last year remain roughly consistent. **Figures 12–14** reveal that the differences in test score reporting rates across URM, first-gen, and fee waiver receipt status persisted even as all groups reported scores more often. These differences existed prior to the pandemic in 2019–20, but were far smaller in magnitude. We also find this trend is similar in gesture, though smaller in scale, for other demographic subgroups (see **Appendix Figure A1–A2**).

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







Trends by member characteristics

Similar to the previous two seasons, the majority of applications submitted through February 15 were to private members. That said, the rate of application growth for public members since 2019–20 (+25%) was still more than that for private members (+18%). **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 was roughly equal for both 2019–20 and 2020–21 seasons (but similar to the December and January updates). These dynamics likely reflect application activity to members with earlier deadlines.

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

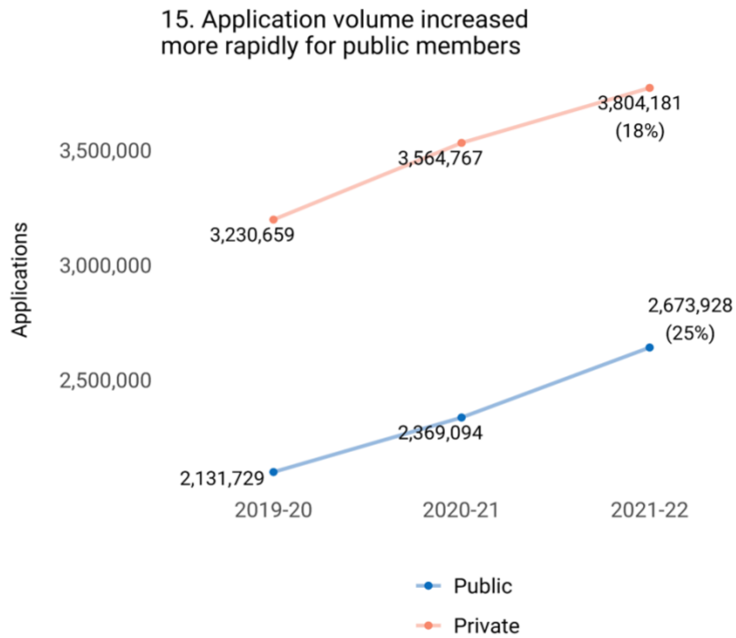
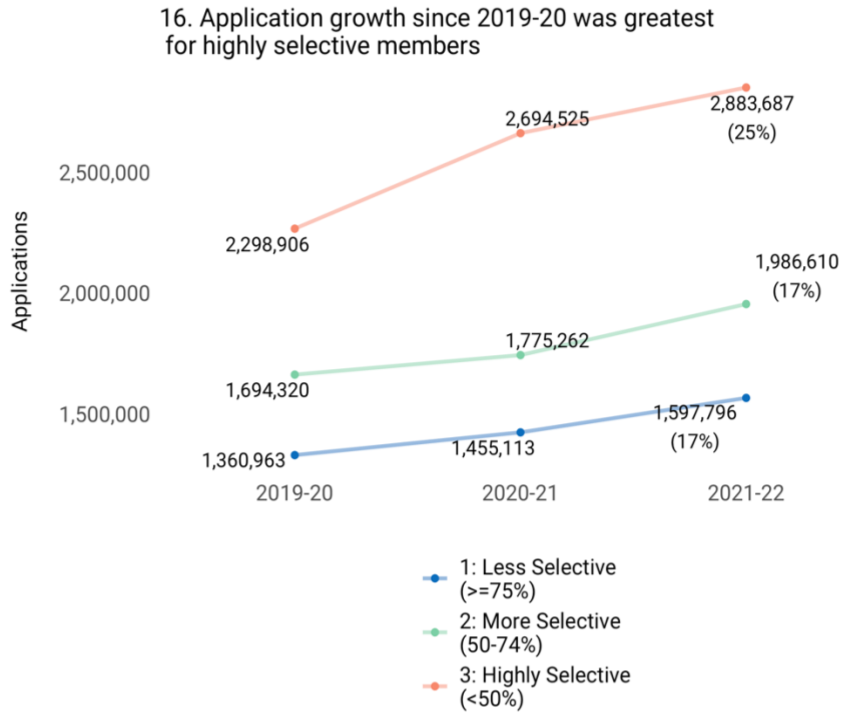


Figure 16 presents trends in application volume by member selectivity, as measured by undergraduate admit rates reported in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Growth in application volume since 2019–20 was greater in magnitude for highly selective members (admit rates below 50%) at 25% than for less selective members. This marks a shift from December, at which point public members had received a larger share of total application volume. 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 early and regular decision deadlines, we see the trends through November, December, and January essentially mirrored here. The numbers of applicants, applications, and applications per applicant have meaningfully increased since 2019–20; URM and first-gen applicants are increasing at a faster rate than their non-URM and continuing-gen counterparts; the majority of applicants continue to hail from the wealthiest ZIP codes; and test score reporting behaviors vary significantly across demographic subgroups. Breaking from December, however, we are now seeing proportionally higher application volume to highly selective schools.

As the application season progresses, we will continue to provide timely analyses of the trends presented here. The final monthly update will be released in mid-March 2022.

Appendix

Figure A1. Test score reporting rates by legal sex since 2019–20

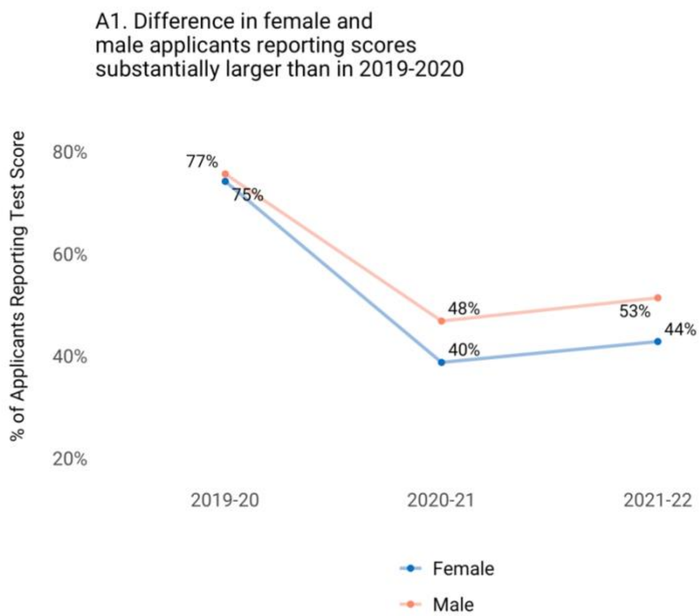


Figure A2. Test score reporting rates by median household income since 2019–20

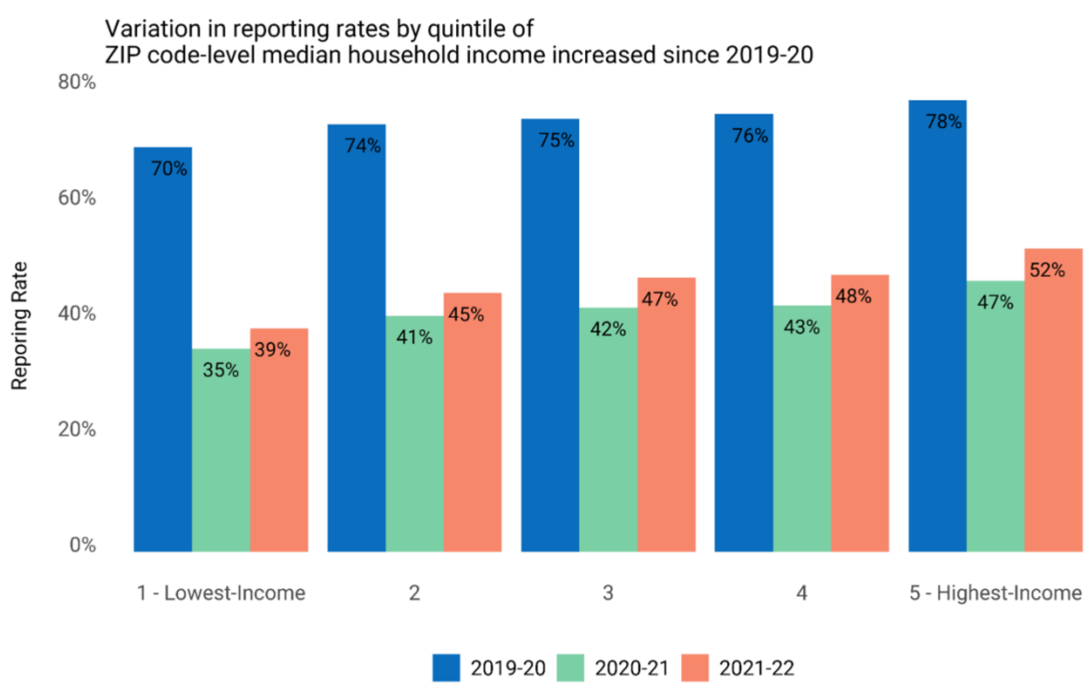


Figure A3. Percentages of 2021–22 in-state applicants by state

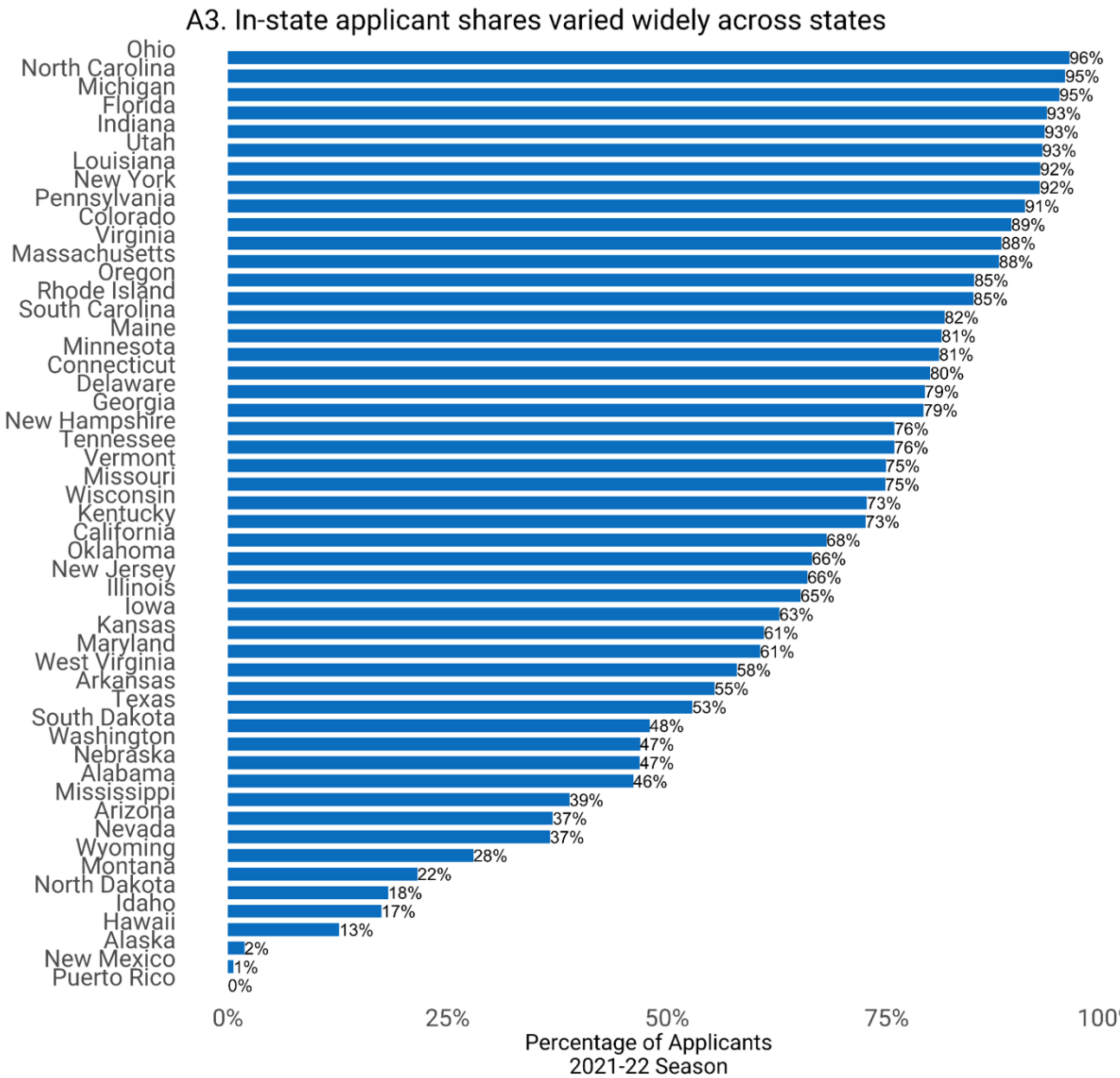


Table A1. Application trends by member region and institutional control

	Private			Public		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Mid-Atlantic	1,149,322	1,258,956	1,309,968	482,564	493,532	563,881
Midwestern	493,641	530,713	575,193	559,590	630,656	717,609
New England	687,363	769,934	834,157	249,118	255,932	277,477
Southern	443,124	505,459	557,276	626,354	723,010	817,962
Southwestern	75,293	89,870	102,614	29,745	39,213	49,733
Western	381,360	409,051	424,030	184,358	226,751	247,266

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	279,419	300,528	306,788	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	127,198	132,955	139,903	58,925	56,670	63,747
District of Columbia	77,226	81,638	72,581	NA	NA	NA
Florida	115,729	129,997	159,666	169,081	187,628	232,030
Georgia	69,929	78,607	86,606	NA	NA	NA
Illinois	159,231	165,586	176,380	NA	NA	NA
Indiana	65,793	68,468	72,008	100,553	107,277	122,890
Iowa	18,520	19,331	23,052	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	6,468	7,590	8,038	NA	NA	NA
Louisiana	47,545	51,552	47,315	NA	NA	NA
Maine	37,921	38,089	40,423	20,804	20,454	21,138
Maryland	61,824	68,884	67,628	26,763	25,194	26,446
Massachusetts	389,074	451,599	497,066	92,359	95,087	101,640
Michigan	21,358	24,028	28,168	124,952	155,165	182,514
Minnesota	32,067	37,203	40,164	30,466	30,761	35,536
Missouri	40,243	47,874	48,854	21,882	23,547	25,273
New Hampshire	36,126	40,735	40,902	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	97,997	99,921	109,209	68,334	56,957	66,953
New York	608,713	674,073	708,727	200,596	195,158	216,890
North Carolina	87,785	103,180	110,716	154,263	175,889	195,349
Ohio	118,388	128,152	141,664	163,219	182,032	201,654
Oregon	29,712	29,435	32,015	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	303,433	334,438	351,660	154,662	183,628	219,453
Rhode Island	78,927	85,976	91,976	NA	NA	NA
South Carolina	11,327	14,244	16,752	NA	NA	NA
Tennessee	56,692	67,505	67,663	NA	NA	NA
Texas	70,642	85,291	96,564	NA	NA	NA
Vermont	18,117	20,580	23,887	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	42,439	47,747	55,034	126,203	135,488	144,017
Washington	34,826	36,679	38,059	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	29,078	30,685	34,159	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	336,428	344,768	376,685	558,845	556,144	620,470	734,583	849,263	874,077
Midwestern	323,571	345,636	383,201	477,149	520,545	592,715	250,454	292,787	314,067
New England	199,859	191,887	204,008	236,228	234,280	253,673	498,986	598,291	652,549
Southern	252,485	280,856	315,014	279,549	315,284	355,888	536,265	631,050	702,575
Southwestern	21,732	26,998	34,026	15,401	20,396	25,286	67,824	81,587	92,936
Western	226,888	264,968	284,862	126,592	127,829	137,635	210,794	241,547	247,483

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	15,840	13,729	14,819	63,454	58,524	60,103	198,681	226,817	230,550
Colorado	75,862	94,323	96,615	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	29,546	27,588	27,874	66,624	58,134	62,014	89,953	103,903	113,762
Florida	NA	NA	NA	87,682	96,104	115,541	183,936	206,901	258,125
Georgia	33,298	36,488	37,874	23,745	25,968	30,020	72,869	87,191	95,420
Illinois	NA	NA	NA	102,103	104,562	115,438	72,942	78,309	81,375
Indiana	62,436	64,193	70,147	84,583	90,063	99,992	NA	NA	NA
Iowa	22,456	23,212	30,187	9,890	10,260	11,425	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	18,942	21,233	23,409	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maine	27,977	26,749	28,281	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maryland	27,469	26,650	27,449	32,612	30,129	30,762	NA	NA	NA
Massachusetts	72,458	71,737	79,491	108,279	108,032	115,052	300,287	366,562	403,869
Michigan	22,026	24,718	33,587	61,408	74,022	91,693	NA	NA	NA
Minnesota	12,192	13,157	14,087	37,145	37,171	42,800	NA	NA	NA
Missouri	19,517	22,156	23,795	16,426	17,601	19,221	NA	NA	NA
New Hampshire	40,936	39,325	40,724	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	42,714	36,110	42,446	73,075	67,935	79,703	NA	NA	NA
New York	103,976	98,121	104,015	274,802	267,297	289,700	430,531	503,813	531,902
North Carolina	60,081	65,941	72,030	54,726	60,463	70,540	127,241	152,665	163,495
Ohio	126,506	134,506	144,749	103,225	117,686	131,957	51,080	57,321	65,924
Oregon	54,962	63,241	68,444	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	155,399	177,535	196,399	146,147	158,188	186,166	154,519	180,030	185,931
Texas	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	65,705	79,758	89,967
Vermont	9,972	9,692	11,271	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	67,550	67,062	72,970	23,725	22,290	24,856	77,367	93,883	101,225
Washington	22,465	23,727	23,636	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	17,800	19,385	20,283	54,562	61,206	71,493	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.