Deadline update: first-year application trends through March 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 final 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 previous update for trends through mid-February here, mid-January here, mid-December here, and mid-November here.

Note: Each update in this series highlights year-over-year application activity for first-year applicants through a specific date (in this case, March 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").

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Key findings

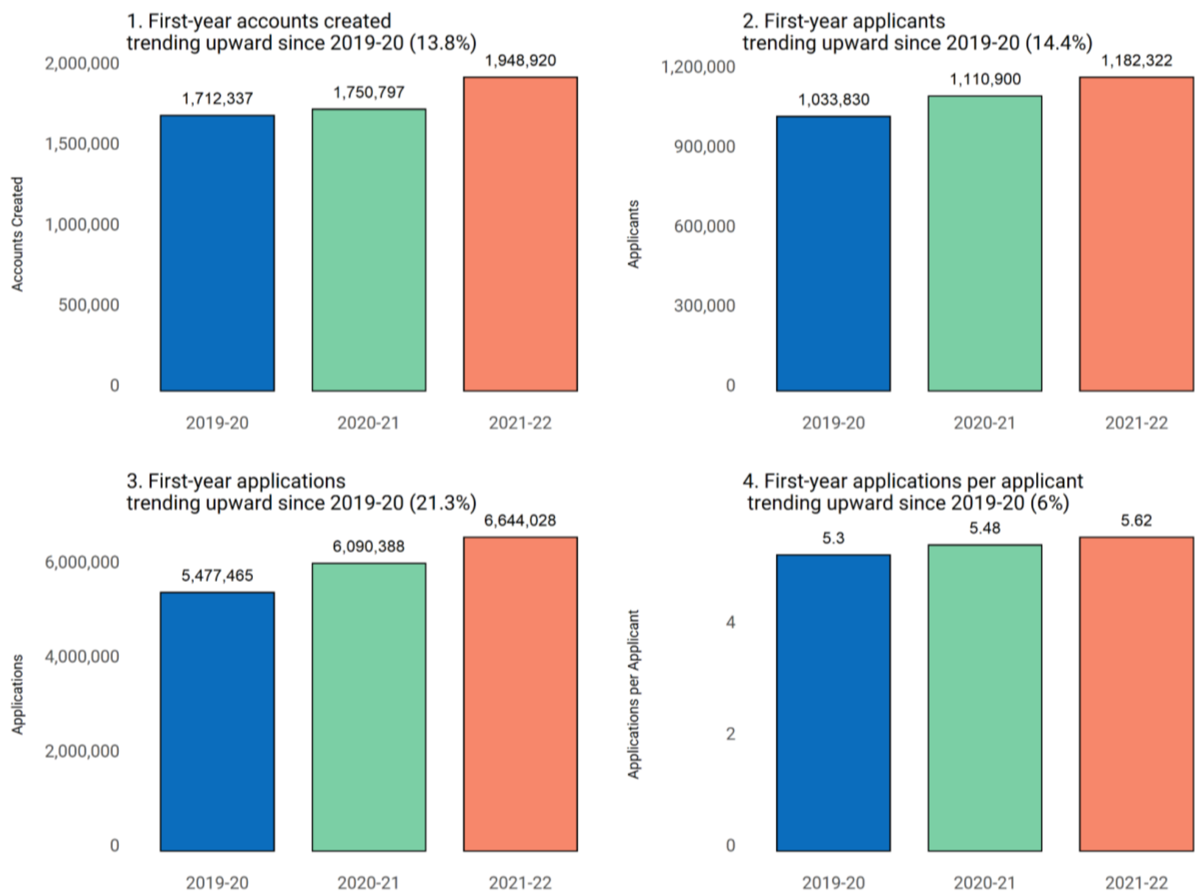
1. In general, the trends surfaced in our February deadline update remain consistent in cumulative application activity through mid-March application deadlines.
2. Through March 15, 2022, 1,182,322 distinct first-year applicants had applied to 853 returning members (an increase of 14.4% from 1,033,830 in 2019–20).
3. Total application volume through March 15 rose 21.3% from 2019–20 (5,477,465) to 2021–22 (6,644,028). Applicants are applying to more members, on average, in 2021–22 than in 2019–20 (+6% from 5.30 to 5.62 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 March. URM applicants increased by 18% over 2019–20, while first-gen applicants increased by 22%. Indeed, first-gen applicants increased at 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-March deadlines.
9. Nearly 59% 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 (+26%, 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 March 15, the overall numbers of accounts created by high school seniors (+13.8%), applicant counts (+14.4%), total applications (+21.3%), and applications per applicant (+6.0%) each increased from 2019–20. The magnitudes of these trends are all generally consistent with what we found during 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

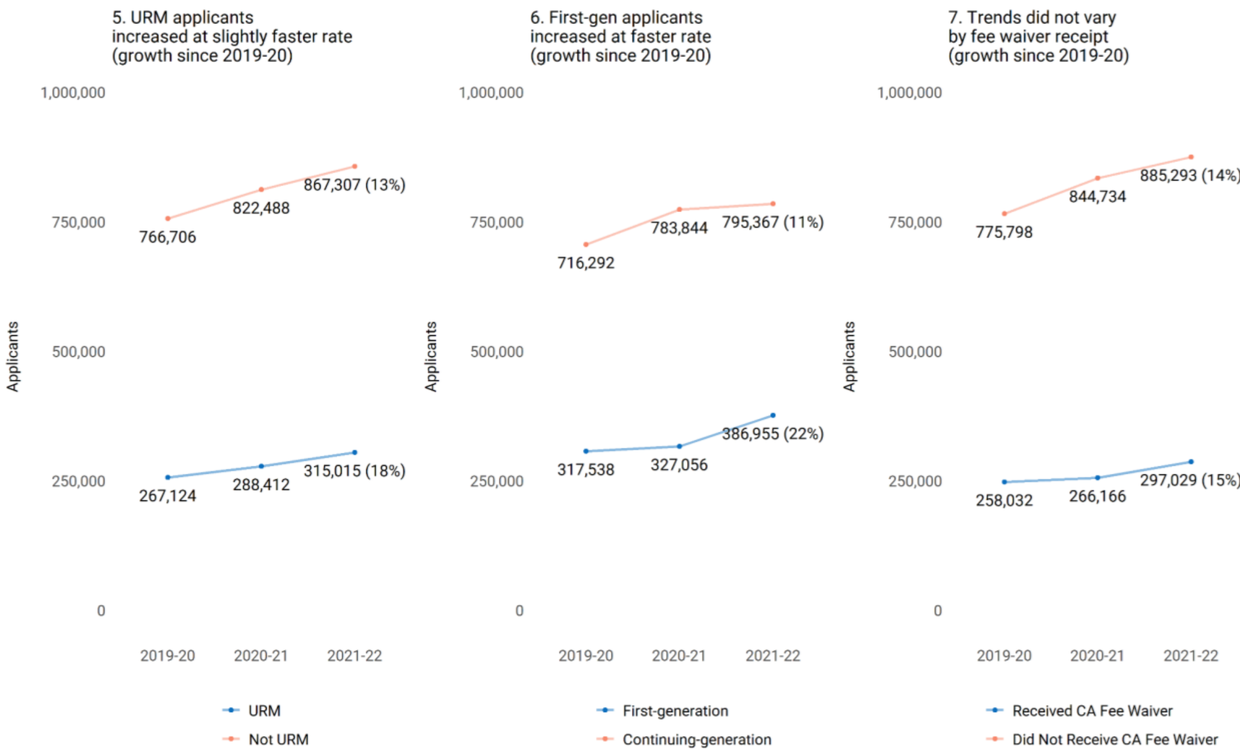


Applicant subgroup trends

Consistent with 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



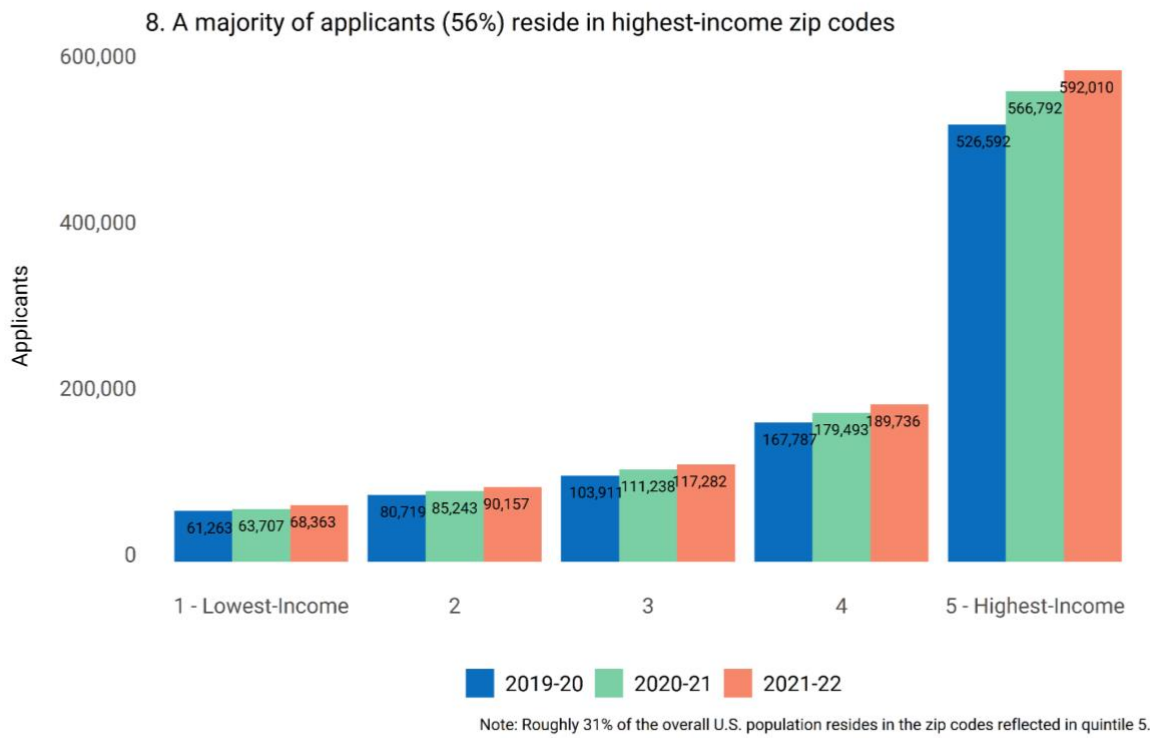
We show in **Figure 5** that, after a smaller increase from 2019–20 to 2020–21, the number of URM applicants rose significantly this season, to over 315,000. This marked an 18% increase over the 2019–20 (pre-pandemic) total through March 15. This increase was greater than that for non-URM applicants across the same time period (+13%), indicating growing diversification of our applicant pool along this dimension.

Figure 6 highlights a striking increase in the number of first-generation applicants (+22%), which was roughly double that for continuing-generation applicants (+11%) since 2019–20. This significant growth is well-aligned with Common App's mission of promoting access for underrepresented students.

Finally, in **Figure 7** we observe an increase in the number of applicants applying with a Common App fee waiver since 2019–20 (+14%) — nearly the same as the increase 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 also increased dramatically since 2019–20 (not pictured; each over 30%). The relatively slow growth in applicants requesting fee waivers is thus attributable, at least in part, to this fact of fewer members requiring them now as compared to 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. **Figure 8** presents 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 earlier 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 increased representation in recent Common App applicant pools for first-generation and URM status (see above), we find that representation among low-income applicant households has not increased.

These trends reiterate the imperative that more work is necessary to effectively engage and support students from lower-income 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 in applicant counts since 2019–20. As with our reporting in prior months, we see growth is evenly spread across the country, except for the Northeast. Looking at state-by-state growth, we see that 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 41%. The lone outlier, South Dakota, is a state with historically low applicant volume.

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

9. Applicant growth generally strong everywhere except northeast

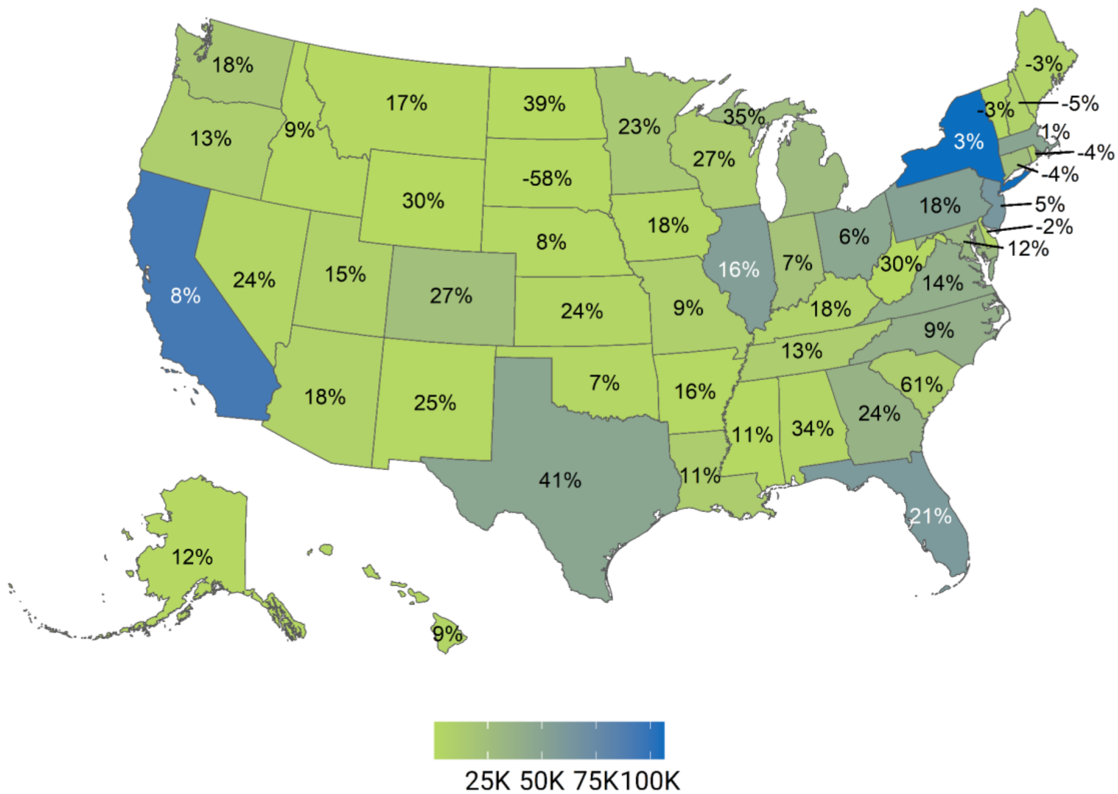
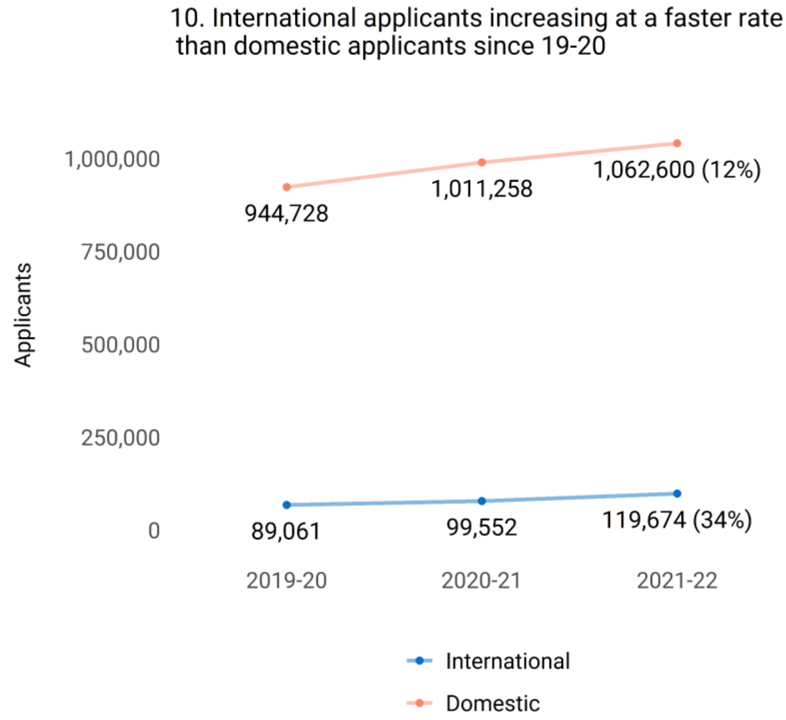


Figure 10 presents a graph of applicant totals, grouped by domestic/international residence and season. We observe that the number of applicants in both categories increased each year, though the rate of growth for international applicants since 2019–20 (34%) nearly tripled that for domestic applicants (12%). The top five home countries, in descending order by applicant volume, were China, India, Canada, Pakistan, and Nigeria.

Figure 10. International and domestic applicants since 2019–20

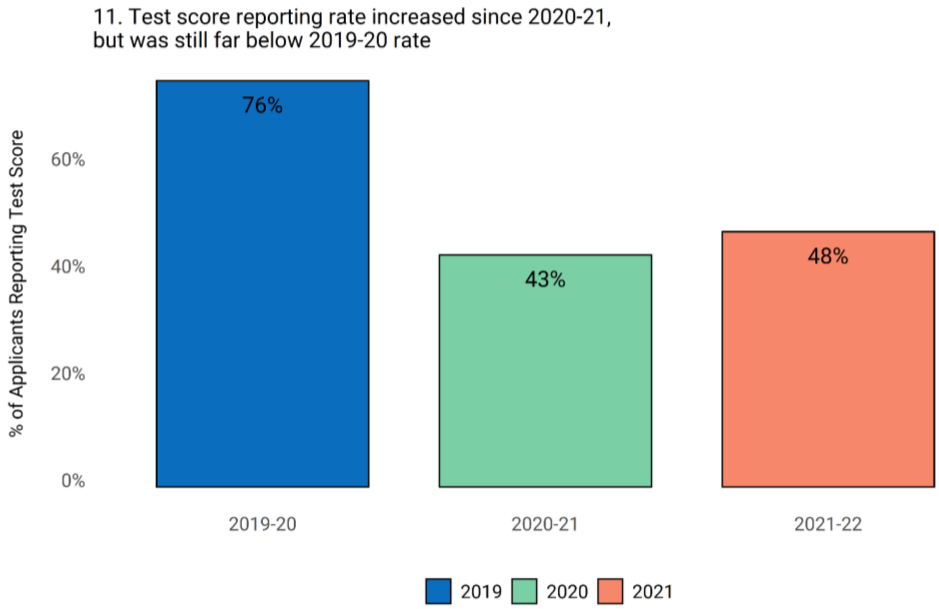


Trends in test score reporting

As 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.

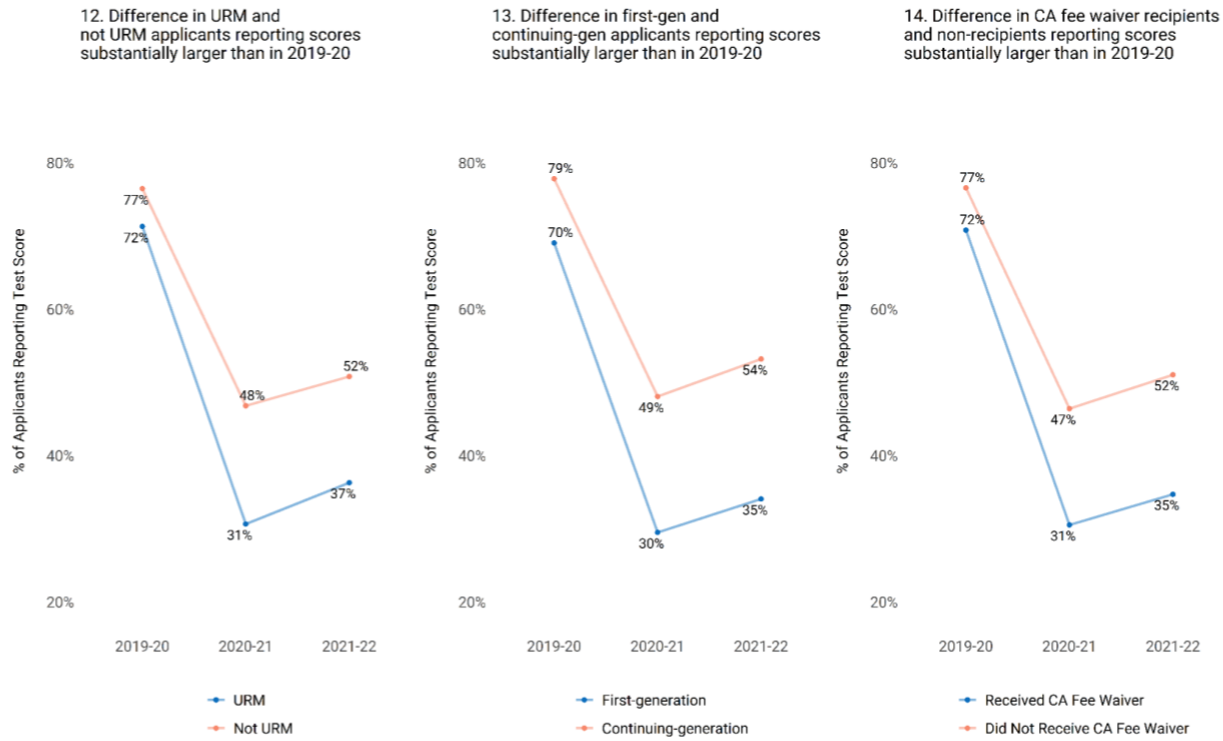
In **Figure 11**, we show that trends surfaced in the previous updates remain consistent here: we saw a slight increase in student test score reporting, even as our membership continued to move toward test-optional or test-flexible policies. The slight increase in the current season, at least in part, 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 evident and roughly consistent with previous deadline updates. **Figures 12–14** show that the differences in test score reporting rates that emerged in 2020–21 across URM, first-gen, and fee waiver receipt status persisted to 2021–22 (even as all groups did report 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

Similarly to the previous two seasons, the majority of applications submitted through March 15 were to private members. That said, the rate of application growth for public members since 2019–20 (+26%) 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 (similar to February 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

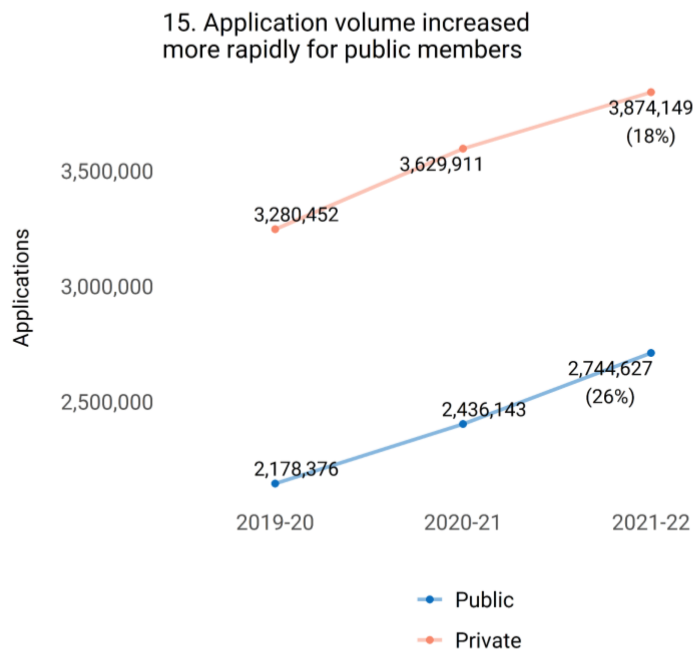
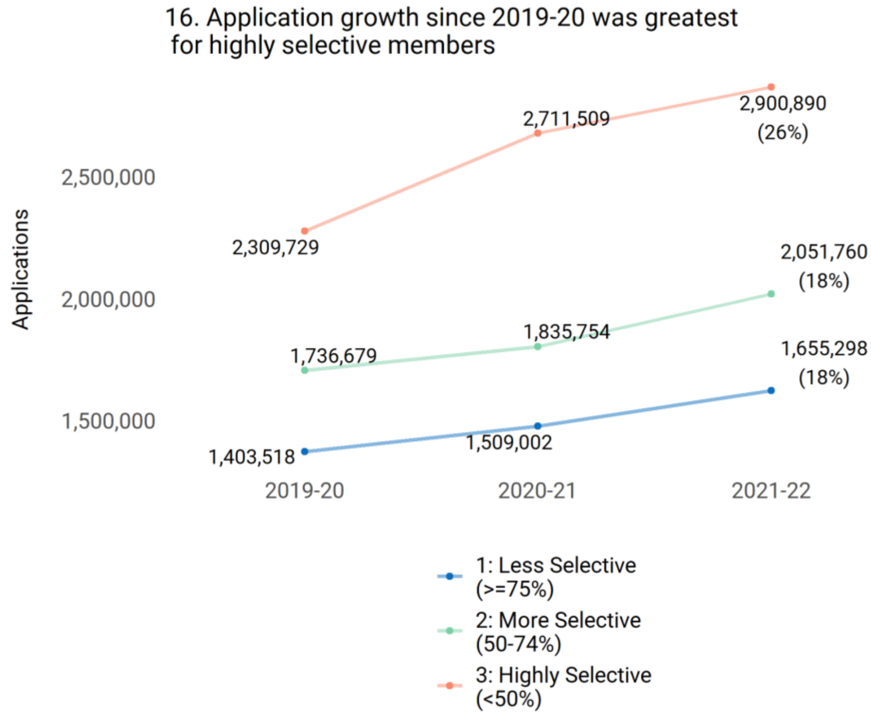


Figure 16 presents trends in application volume by member selectivity, as measured by undergraduate admit rates reported in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Growth in application volume since 2019–20 was greater in magnitude for highly selective (admit rates below 50%) members at 26% than for less selective members. 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 large 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 described in previous deadline updates 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.

This is our final monthly update for the 2021–2022 application season.

Appendix

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

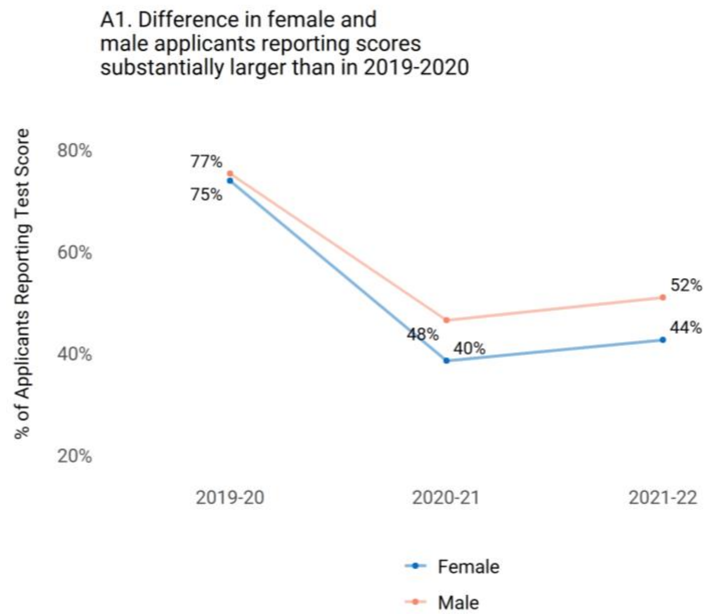


Figure A2. Test score reporting rates by median household income since 2019–20

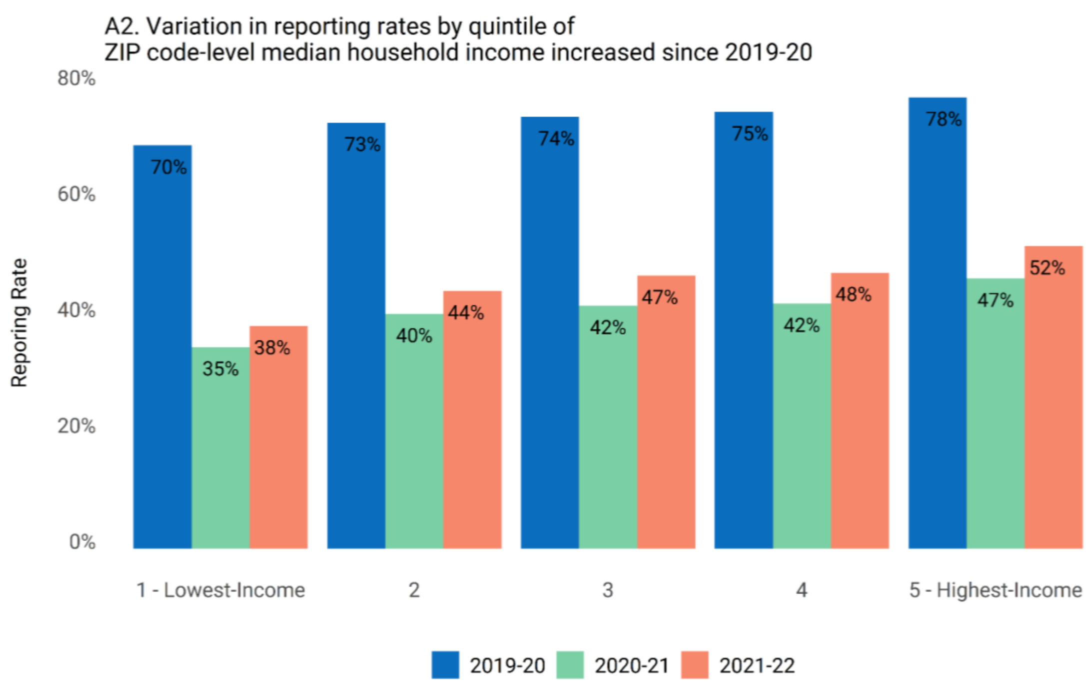


Figure A3. Percentages of 2021–22 in-state applicants by state

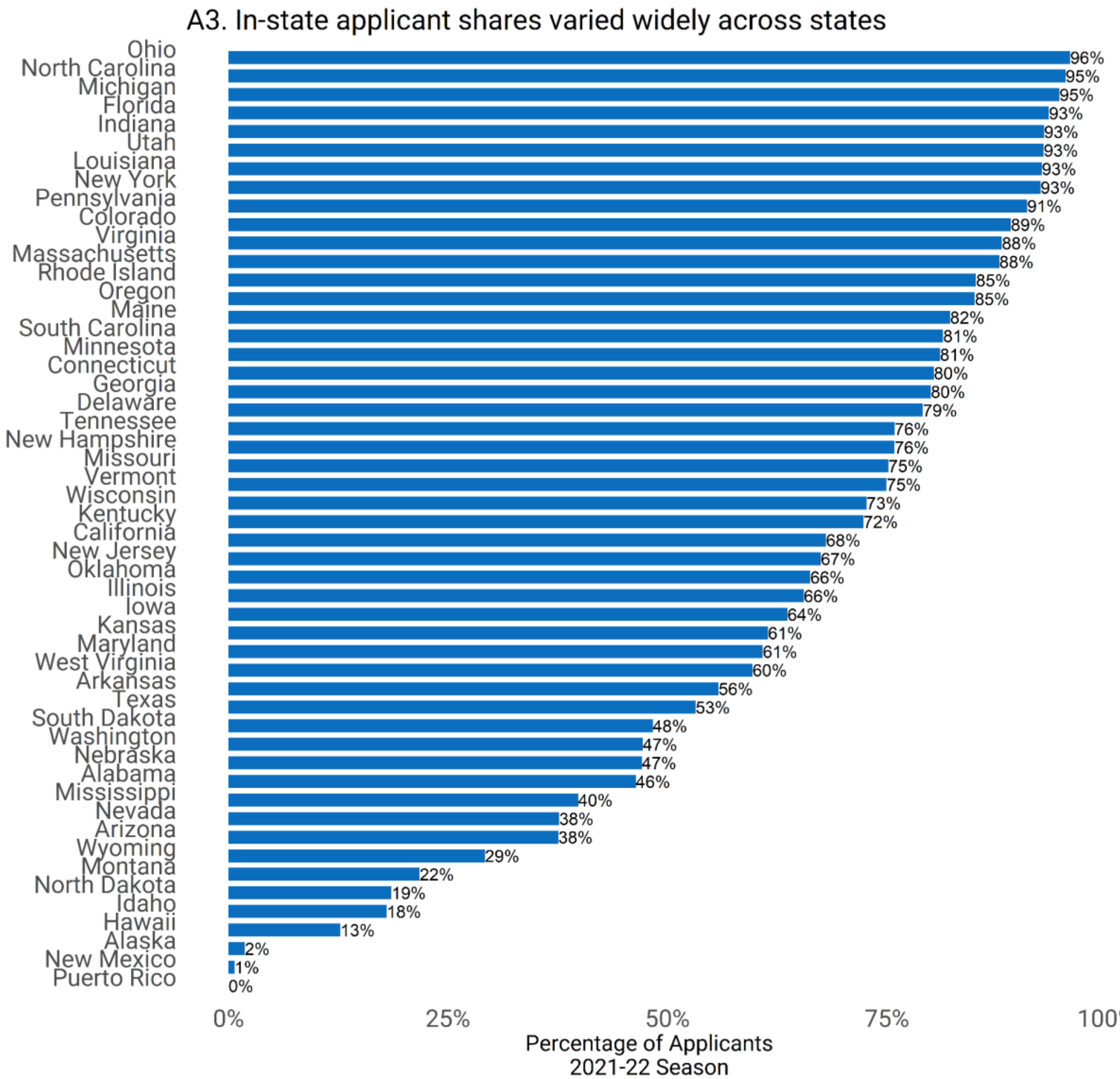


Table A1. Application trends by member region and institutional control

	Private			Public		
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Mid-Atlantic	1,167,233	1,282,505	1,334,970	495,872	514,333	584,217
Midwestern	502,951	542,429	590,309	567,762	642,486	730,902
New England	693,576	778,162	842,300	255,807	262,561	283,365
Southern	453,963	521,823	573,122	640,033	743,621	840,743
Southwestern	76,689	90,947	103,753	30,824	41,109	52,185
Western	385,377	413,145	428,591	188,078	232,033	253,215

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	281,908	302,668	308,952	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	128,655	135,099	142,075	60,642	58,384	65,318
District of Columbia	77,733	82,274	73,825	NA	NA	NA
Florida	120,327	137,643	166,423	174,604	198,363	243,077
Georgia	71,832	81,376	89,040	NA	NA	NA
Illinois	161,957	169,114	181,042	NA	NA	NA
Indiana	66,732	69,654	73,444	101,107	108,011	123,538
Iowa	19,094	20,089	23,918	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	6,619	7,803	8,243	NA	NA	NA
Louisiana	48,242	52,610	48,370	NA	NA	NA
Maine	38,241	38,463	40,899	21,751	21,681	22,217
Maryland	62,642	69,842	68,644	27,280	25,764	27,057
Massachusetts	392,083	455,311	500,809	94,946	96,811	103,440
Michigan	21,989	24,921	29,320	126,556	157,318	185,204
Minnesota	32,695	37,964	41,023	30,635	31,068	35,904
Missouri	40,731	48,582	49,722	22,666	24,535	26,497
New Hampshire	36,743	41,686	41,584	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	100,927	103,515	113,526	72,415	62,517	72,999
New York	617,871	685,930	720,241	205,548	202,542	223,675
North Carolina	88,917	104,421	112,293	156,832	178,625	198,858
Ohio	120,715	130,663	145,141	166,130	186,086	206,158
Oregon	30,192	29,940	32,701	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	307,921	340,937	358,549	158,368	190,677	226,112
Rhode Island	79,585	86,770	92,838	NA	NA	NA
South Carolina	11,475	14,724	17,326	NA	NA	NA
Tennessee	57,204	68,227	68,390	NA	NA	NA
Texas	71,876	86,149	97,372	NA	NA	NA
Vermont	18,269	20,833	24,095	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	44,022	49,836	57,365	127,437	137,003	145,565
Washington	35,266	37,275	38,788	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	29,683	31,578	35,347	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	349,012	361,443	393,872	574,753	579,151	643,489	737,163	853,704	878,972
Midwestern	331,995	356,899	396,373	485,589	532,161	607,196	250,952	293,272	314,677
New England	207,680	200,717	211,712	240,643	239,461	258,965	499,561	599,034	653,476
Southern	260,937	290,823	326,143	289,849	331,748	373,403	541,886	641,418	712,361
Southwestern	22,211	27,781	35,033	16,326	21,966	27,309	68,889	82,207	93,497
Western	231,683	271,339	292,165	128,856	130,367	140,294	211,278	241,874	247,907

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	16,409	14,265	15,353	64,771	59,741	61,321	199,090	227,064	230,838
Colorado	76,441	95,108	97,457	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Connecticut	30,820	29,218	29,330	68,232	60,016	63,972	90,245	104,249	114,091
Florida	NA	NA	NA	92,717	104,783	124,070	188,217	215,610	266,316
Georgia	35,852	39,454	40,806	24,967	27,902	31,939	73,138	87,462	95,482
Illinois	NA	NA	NA	104,568	108,233	120,145	73,193	78,566	81,673
Indiana	63,294	65,280	71,287	85,184	90,875	100,907	NA	NA	NA
Iowa	23,245	24,284	31,554	10,318	10,860	12,120	NA	NA	NA
Kentucky	19,444	21,831	24,172	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maine	29,074	28,149	29,564	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Maryland	28,062	27,322	28,275	33,354	30,985	31,563	NA	NA	NA
Massachusetts	75,773	74,458	81,989	110,382	110,442	117,601	300,445	366,848	404,358
Michigan	22,587	25,350	34,530	62,979	76,323	94,402	NA	NA	NA
Minnesota	12,486	13,560	14,580	37,600	37,803	43,492	NA	NA	NA
Missouri	20,195	23,084	24,877	16,964	18,257	20,161	NA	NA	NA
New Hampshire	41,876	41,017	41,831	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
New Jersey	45,584	39,391	46,075	77,052	73,160	85,764	NA	NA	NA
New York	108,533	103,437	109,114	282,499	278,144	300,009	432,387	506,891	534,793
North Carolina	61,826	67,642	74,497	56,359	62,418	72,778	127,564	152,986	163,876
Ohio	129,941	138,935	149,995	104,902	119,691	134,565	51,184	57,420	66,023
Oregon	55,628	64,174	69,678	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pennsylvania	159,899	184,867	203,921	149,587	164,029	191,779	154,626	180,178	186,107
Texas	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	66,715	80,288	90,351
Vermont	10,294	10,128	11,662	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	69,096	68,941	74,947	24,489	23,249	25,962	77,874	94,649	102,021
Washington	22,891	24,332	24,371	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Wisconsin	18,125	19,849	20,934	54,936	61,791	72,228	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.