

First-year admission plans: trends over time and applicant composition

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Executive summary

[Previous research](#) suggests first-year applicants who use Early Decision and Early Action experience an increased probability of admission compared to applicants in the Regular Decision pool. Unfortunately, there appear to be [disparities](#) in who applies to college using early admission plans. The potential utilization of certain decision types by specific subgroups may have meaningful implications for student equity, especially as the [popularity of Early Action and Early Decision grows](#).

Here, we re-explore findings from prior research suggesting White, more affluent, and non-first-generation students were overrepresented in early admission applicant pools. We extend our analysis beyond a few selective colleges and universities, re-examining student demographics across various admission plans with data from Common App's 900-plus institutional members. We also explore the extent to which colleges may have changed the availability of certain admission plans during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Princeton University](#), for example, paused its Single-Choice Early Action program, hoping to "reduce some of the pressure on applicants and give them the time to prepare their strongest applications." We find hardly any other college or university made changes to their admission plans, beyond [delaying deadlines](#). Corroborating what past research has found, applicants from low-income neighborhoods, as well as underrepresented minority (URM) and first-generation applicants, are less represented in early admission pools than their peers.

Contents

[Key findings](#)

[Admission plans available through Common App members](#)

[Applicant demographics and admission plans in 2020–21](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Key findings

1. Most (63%) Common App members offered [Rolling Admission](#) plans in the 2020–2021 application cycle.
2. Less selective schools (those with admit rates greater than or equal to 50%) tended to offer the least restrictive and chronologically later admission plans.
3. [Early Decision](#) was the least common decision type among Common App members. Nonetheless, over $\frac{1}{4}$ of Common App members provided this admission plan to applicants — and 44% of these institutions were more selective (those with admit rates less than 50%).
4. Wealthier, non-first-generation, and non-underrepresented minority applicants were more likely to submit at least 1 application using Early Action and Early Decision.

Admission plans available through Common App members

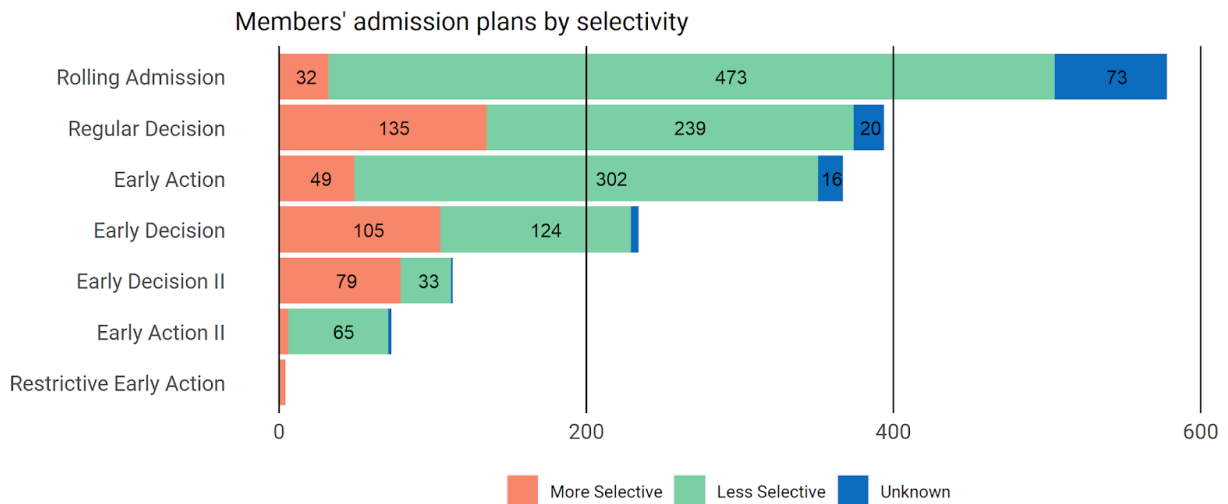
College and university members offered applicants 7 distinct admission plan types in the 2020–21 application cycle. Below, in **Figure 1**, we sort the frequency of plans in descending order of popularity with our members.

1. **Rolling Admission:** allows applicants to submit their application materials at any time during the application season
2. **Regular Decision:** a non-restrictive (ability to apply to other schools) admission plan with deadlines typically occurring in early January
3. **Early Action I (EA):** like Regular Decision however on an earlier timeline, a non-restrictive plan with deadlines generally in November and December, and applicants typically receive an admissions decision in January or February
4. **Early Action II:** similar to Early Action, but offered later in January with admissions decisions released in February
5. **Early Decision I (ED):** a binding (must withdraw all other applications if accepted), single-institution restrictive admission plan with deadlines starting in late Fall
6. **Early Decision II:** similar to Early Decision, but offered later in the application season; the same restrictions apply
7. **Restrictive Early Action (REA):** a non-binding, single-institution restrictive plan more stringent than Early Action but less restrictive than Early Decision, applicants should not apply to different schools using REA and ED at the same time; applicants may apply to other schools using Early Action, Regular Decision, and Rolling Admission

A Common App college or university can offer multiple admission plans in a single season, and most do, offering a combination of Regular Decision, Early Action, and Early Decision options. As seen below in **Figure 1**, generally speaking, the least restrictive and later admission plans were most popular among our less selective¹ members. Less selective schools comprised most of the members offering Rolling Admission, at over 80%. Selective institutions, on the other hand, comprised a larger proportion of members who offered Early Decision (45%) and Early Decision II (80%), while they made up just 6% of institutions with Rolling Admission. Meanwhile, Restrictive Early Action was only offered at our most selective schools, and Early Action II tended to be offered by less selective members. Likely a product of colleges' enrollment management strategies, more restrictive and earlier deadlines were more popular among our selective members.

¹ We classified institutions as more selective when their IPEDS undergraduate admit rate was below 50% and less selective when their admit rate was equal to or greater than 50%. International members and members with missing data were categorized in this cross-tabulation as unknown due to the unavailability of their selectivity data in IPEDS.

Figure 1: Least restrictive admission plans were most popular among our less selective members

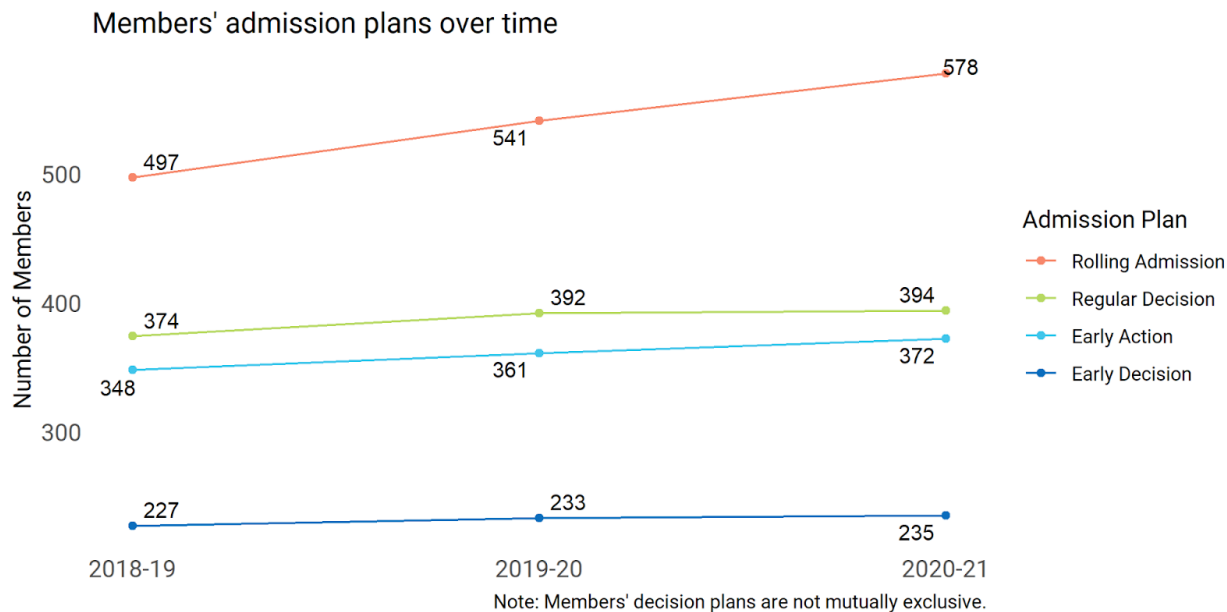


Note: Members' decision plans are not mutually exclusive.

To examine trends over time in the prevalence of various admission plans, we collapse these 7 admission plans into 4 categories, as seen on the next page in **Figure 2**. Early Action includes Early Action I, Early Action II, and Restrictive Early Action; Early Decision contains Early Decision I and Early Decision II. In the 2020–21 season, Rolling Admission was offered at 578 out of 914 active members (63%), Regular Decision at 394 (43%), some form of Early Action at 372 (41%), and some form of Early Decision at 235 (26%). While some institutions like Princeton University changed the availability of certain admission plans in 2020–21, we do not find this pattern consistent when examining our entire membership. Increases, over time, in all 4 grouped plans are attributable, at least partially, to the growth of the Common App membership.²

² Membership of the Common App increased from 819 in 2018–19 to 878 in 2019–20, and to 914 in 2020–21. Additional information regarding the composition of our membership can be found in our previously published research [brief on Common App membership trends](#).

Figure 2: 63% of Common App members provided Rolling Admission plans in the 2020–21 season, up from 61% in 2018–19

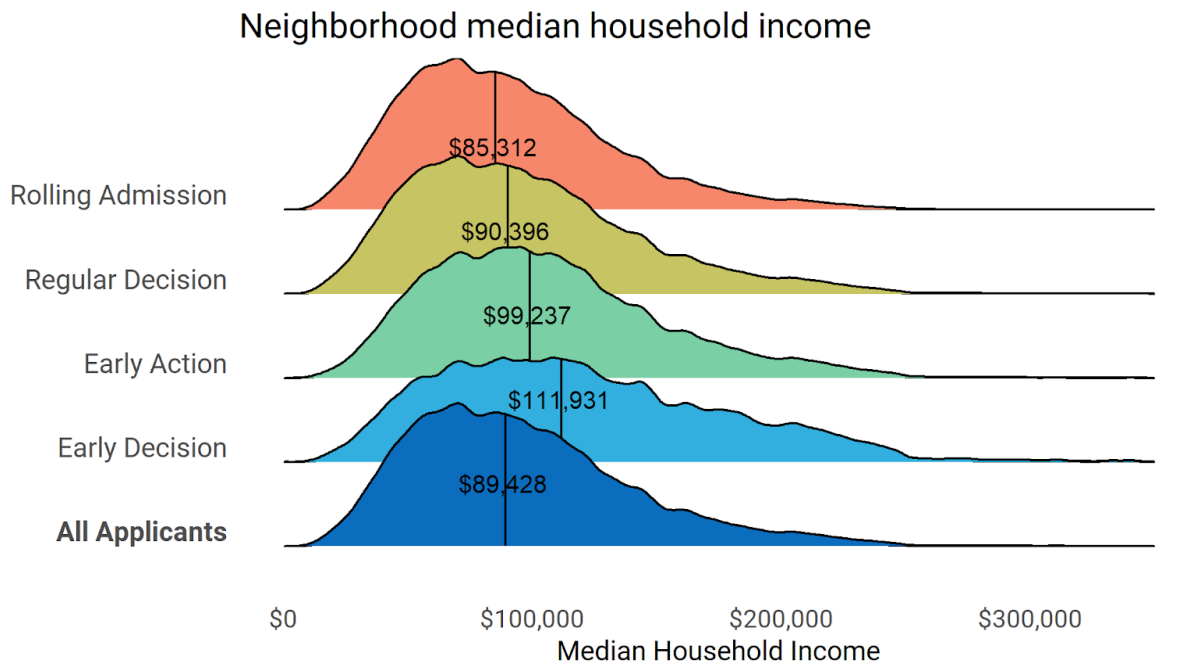


Applicant demographics and admission plans in 2020–21

While examining trends in admissions plans across members provides insight, it is equally important to examine which applicants are applying to each plan. Here we compare neighborhood-level socioeconomic characteristics of students who apply in each deadline below. **Figure 3** provides the distribution of our domestic applicants' neighborhood median household income by admission plan, as defined by their census block group³. The line, in black, indicates the typical (median) applicant's neighborhood household income for each plan. We account for multiple applications per applicant by reducing our analysis to the applicant level within a given admission plan, though applicants may appear in multiple admission plans. For example, an applicant applying to 1 school via Regular Decision and 5 schools via Early Action will be included in each of those 2 distributions once.

³ We use Experian's Census Area Projections & Estimates (CAPE) database to match domestic applicants' addresses with census block income estimates. International students are excluded from this analysis for lack of available income data. Additional information regarding their estimates can be found [here](#). In the 2020-21 application season, we matched 91% of all first-year domestic applicants, and unmatched addresses were randomly distributed across the United States.

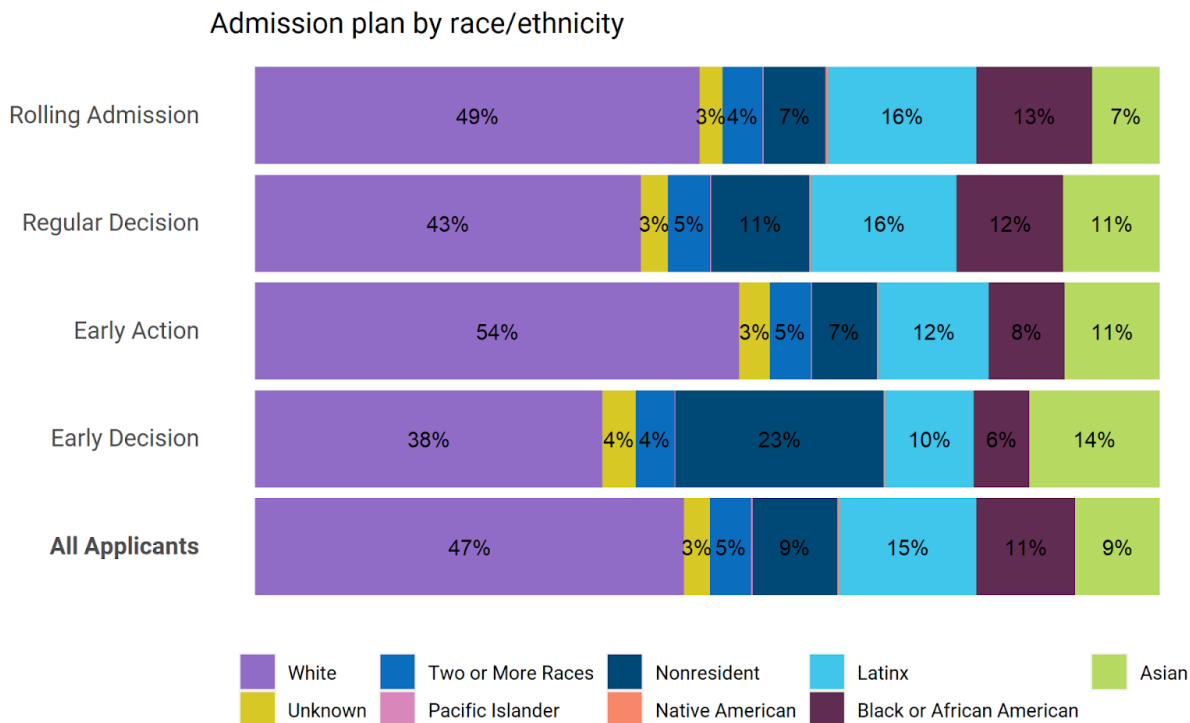
Figure 3: Students from higher-SES census block groups applied using Early Decision and Early Action



Note: Decision plans are not mutually exclusive.

Applicants applying to early admission plans (Early Action and Early Decision) came from substantially higher-income neighborhoods relative to other admission plans on average. For example, the median first-year applicant who applied to schools using Early Decision came from neighborhoods where the median household income was over \$111,000. The typical first-year applicant who applied using Rolling Admissions, on the other hand, lived in a neighborhood where the median household income was \$85,312, a nearly \$27,000 difference. Regardless of admission plan, Common App applicants come from higher-income neighborhoods compared to the typical census tract’s median household income; the typical U.S. neighborhood has a median household income of \$60,385, and an average of \$68,969.

Figure 4: Differences in racial and ethnic composition is attributable to Early admission plans

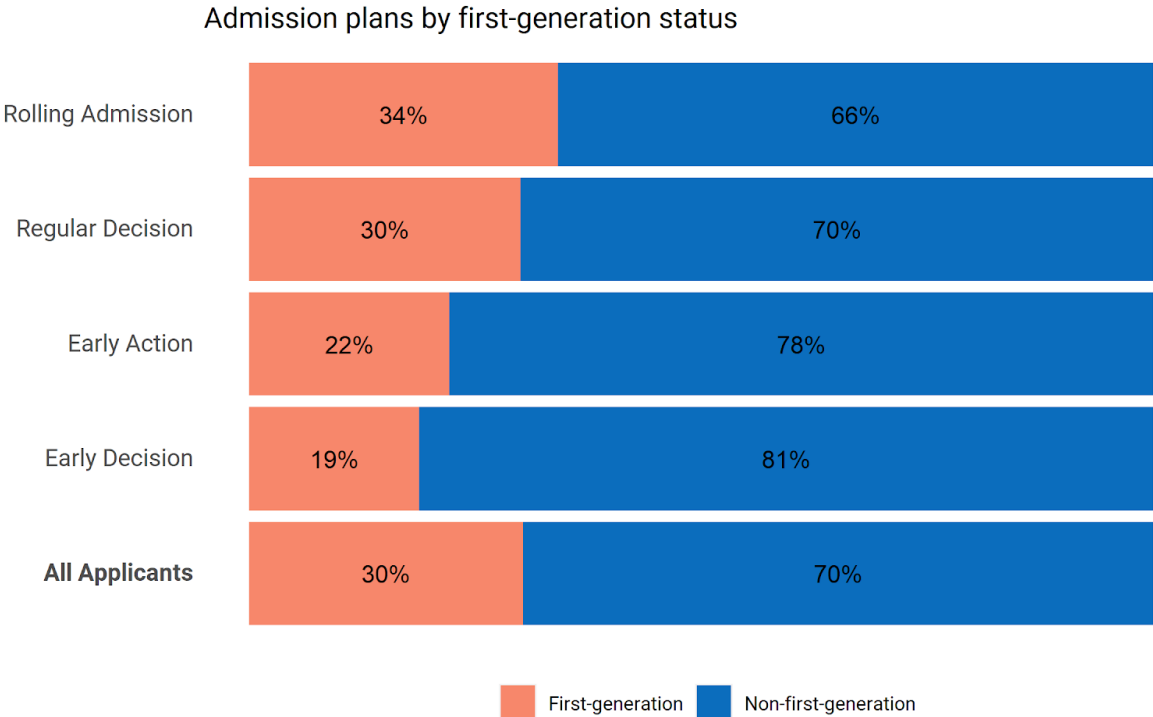


Note: Decision plans are not mutually exclusive.

In **Figure 4**, patterns of under and over-representation by race and ethnicity emerge when examining application behavior by admission plan utilization – again, each student in the visualization is included once in each decision type, so the categories are not mutually exclusive at the applicant level. Early action applicants were more likely to be White (54%) as compared to the entire first-year applicant pool (47% White). Non-resident applicants comprised an outsized proportion (23%) of Early Decision applicants in the 2020–21 season, compared to the 9% of all first-year Common App applicants. On the other hand, Black applicants comprised 11% of the Common App applicant pool, but only 6% of Early Decision and 8% of Early Action applicants. Latinx applicants (15% of the pool) were also underrepresented in the Early Decision (10%) and Early Action (12%) population. Asian students, meanwhile, were significantly overrepresented in the Early Decision pool at 14%, as compared to a 9% share of the entire applicant population.

We also observed differential representation when we examine admission plans by first-generation status. As seen below, non-first-generation applicants were overrepresented in Early Decision and Early Action plans compared to first-generation applicants. In **Figure 5** we display the utilization of each decision type by applicants’ first-generation status. Over 1/3 of Rolling Admission applicants come from first-generation backgrounds, compared to just 22% and 19% of Early Action and Early Decision applicants, respectively.

Figure 5: Continuing-generation applicants comprised a larger proportion of the Early Action and Early Decision applicant pool compared to Rolling Admission and Regular Decision pool



Note: Decision plans are not mutually exclusive.

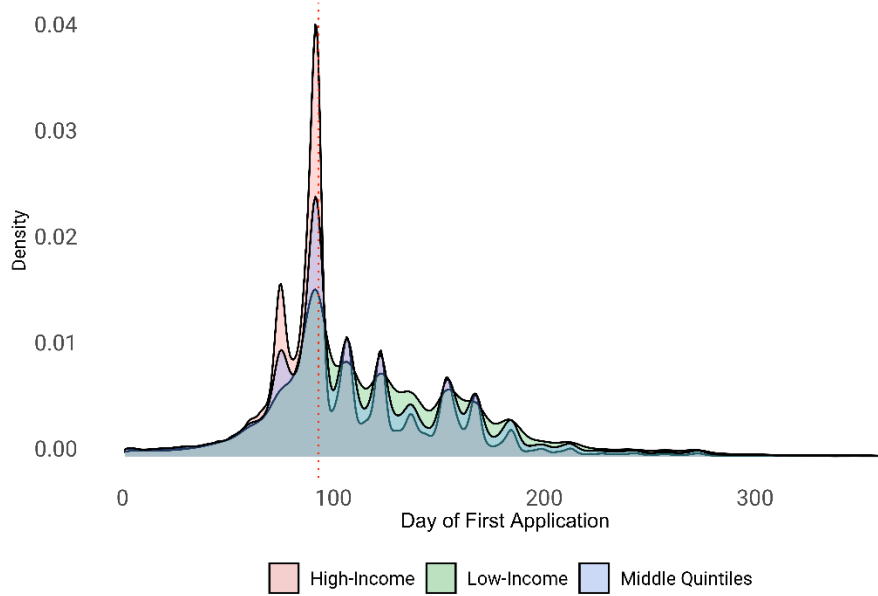
Conclusion

In this report, we sought to update our collective understanding of first-year admission plans offered by Common App’s membership and the types of students who utilize certain application pathways. As detailed in the analysis, our more selective members continued to offer Early Decision and/or Early Action during the 2020–21 cycle. Our less selective members offered less-restrictive decision plans, potentially to provide flexibility and attract applicants from more diverse and nontraditional backgrounds. These results reflect a lack of low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students in the first-year early admission pool of the Common App membership. As colleges and universities aim to increase the [diversity of their incoming classes](#), it may be beneficial to critically evaluate the various admission pathways they offer to prospective students. Our findings illuminate potential areas for improvement, especially as Common App members pursue access, equity, and integrity in the college admissions process.

Appendix

Lower-income applicants were less likely to apply early than more affluent peers

Density of 2020-21 applicants' first application dates, by income subgroupings



Note: Zip code-level median household income data from American Community Survey. Red line indicates November 1 Deadline.