

Long-term progress toward diversifying the Common App applicant pool

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Data Analytics and Research

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Introduction

Noting disparities in college enrollment and attainment across students from different demographic and socioeconomic subgroups, Common App has committed to increasing the diversity of students using its platform. The goal of this work is to provide a more equitable application experience for students, many of whom may lack information and resources (school, social, family, financial, etc.) to support their college searches.

In this research brief, we track long-term growth in the Common App applicant pool between 2013–14 and 2021–22. We then examine the degree to which growth trends vary across applicants' demographic characteristics and geographic locations. Finally, we explore the extent to which this variation was associated with changes in the Common App membership over the past eight years.

Overall, we find that growth rates among underrepresented applicant subgroups far exceeded overall applicants trends since 2013–14. We also note that the largest increases in applicant diversity were in states where public flagship institutions had recently joined the Common App membership.

Note: Analyses reflect first-year applicants.

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Key findings

1. **Overall applicant volume increased 72% between 2013–14 and 2021–22.**
The number of applicants using Common App to submit a first-year application reached 1,240,678 in 2021–22, marking a 72% increase since the 2013–14 season (719,517 applicants).
2. **Growth among applicants from underrepresented subgroups outpaced that for the overall population.**
The number of first-generation applicants, fee waiver recipients, and underrepresented minority¹ (URM) applicants entering the Common App first-year platform increased at higher rates than those for the overall applicant pool. Additional analyses confirm that changes in the demographics of high school graduation cohorts do not account for these trends.
3. **Trends varied meaningfully across geographic contexts, as well.**
Within the United States, we observed tremendous variation in applicant trends, both across ZIP codes and U.S. states. Applicant increases were largest in lower-income zip codes, on average, as well as in the South, the Southwest, and the Midwest regions of the United States. On the other hand, long-term changes were smallest in the West, the Mid-Atlantic, and New England.
4. **The largest increases in underrepresented applicants emerged in states that added their flagship institutions since 2013–14.**

We observed the largest increases in overall applicants in those states where the flagship public institution joined Common App since the 2013–14 season. We also saw the largest increases in first-generation, URM, and Common App fee waiver-receiving applicants in these states. **In fact, flagship institutions joined the Common App membership in nine out of the ten states with the highest growth rates for URM applicants, nine of the ten states with the fastest growth rates for first-generation applicants, and nine out of the ten states with the fastest growth rates for CA Fee Waiver recipients.** Of the ten states wherein the rates of growth were the slowest in these categories, just two states saw their flagship institution join the Common App during this period. This finding suggests that expanding and diversifying the Common App membership may have strengthened efforts to ensure a more equitable application process for a diverse population of college-aspiring students.

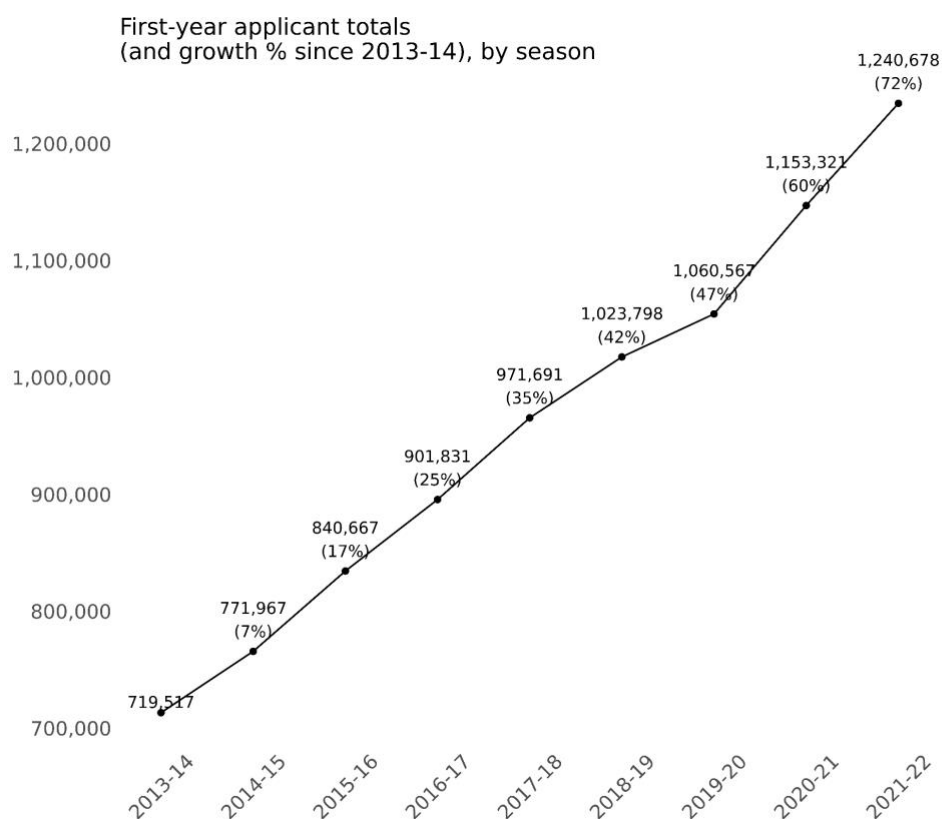
Note: Particularly in the Southeast, many of the most rapidly diversifying state-level applicant pools also added multiple member Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) since 2013–14.

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 growth in Common App membership

Between 2013–14 and 2021–22, the number of total applicants rose 72% from 719,517 to 1,240,678. As we highlight in **Figure 1**, this trend reflects meaningful growth across each season since 2013–14. This graph includes both domestic and international applicants.

Figure 1: Common App applicants increased dramatically since 2013–14 (includes domestic and international applicants).



Demographic diversity: to what extent did growth trends vary by applicant characteristics?

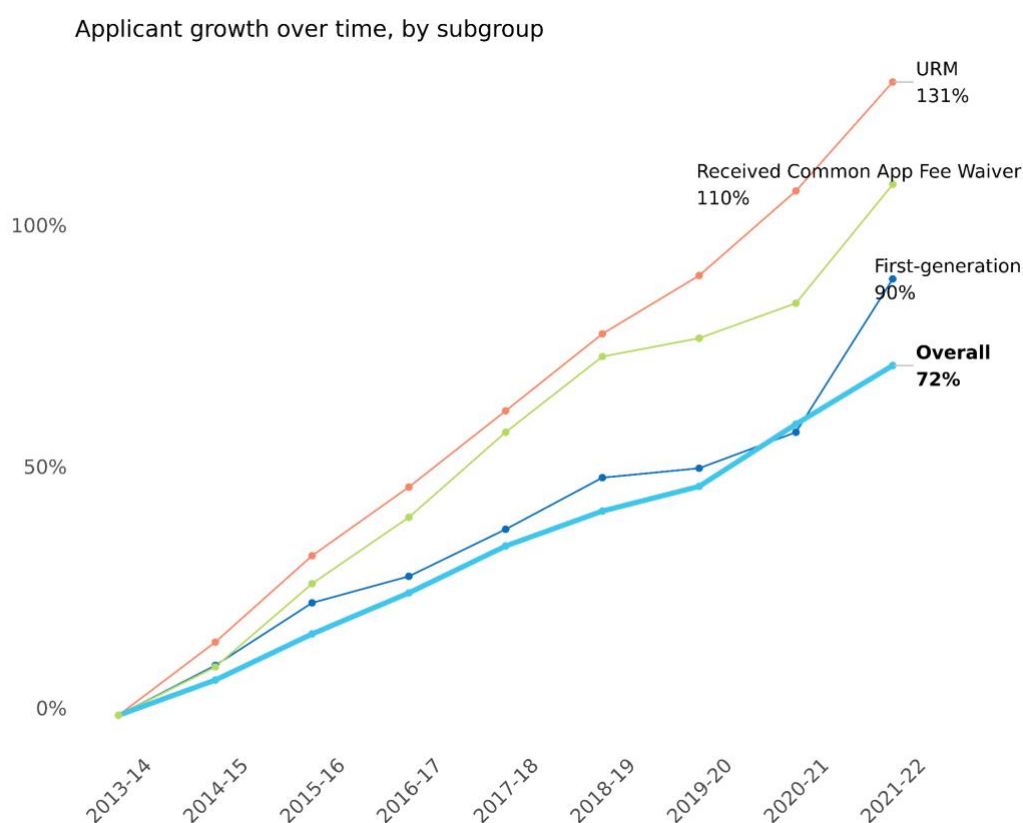
Central to Common App’s mission is the goal to ensure a more equitable college application process. In addition to removing barriers within the application itself to ensure a clear, transparent, and streamlined process (through initiatives such as [Evolving the Application](#)), Common App has also sought to expand access to the platform for students across geographic and demographic contexts. To the extent Common App is able to offer a simple, transparent platform to an increasingly diverse cohort of students, it will be successful in bringing positive change to a process historically laden with inequities. Comparing trends from 2013–14 reveals that growth in these applicant subgroups substantially outpaced overall increases in applicants. Specifically, as we present in **Figure 2**, the number of first-generation (+90% since 2013–14), Common App fee waiver-receiving (+110%), and URM applicants (+131%) each outpaced the

overall increase of 72%². This trend indicates that, over the last eight years, the Common App applicant pool has grown increasingly more diverse.

While trends in this figure highlight meaningful growth over time, the figure does not address the composition of the applicant pool or how it has changed over time. We clarify this in **Appendix Figure A1**, where we show changes in the composition of applicants between 2013–14 and 2021–22. Specifically, we find that the composition of first-generation, URM, and fee waiver-receiving students increased meaningfully during this time.

Finally, we present complete counts of applicants, grouped by season and applicant subgroup in **Appendix Table A1**.

Figure 2: Trends were most pronounced for first-generation, fee waiver recipient, and URM applicants (includes domestic and international applicants)



To assess the degree to which national population dynamics were driving these changes, we also analyzed high school graduation cohort data from each state since 2013. We found that changes in the racial/ethnic composition of high school graduates over the past decade do not explain the substantial shift in the composition of the Common App applicant pool.

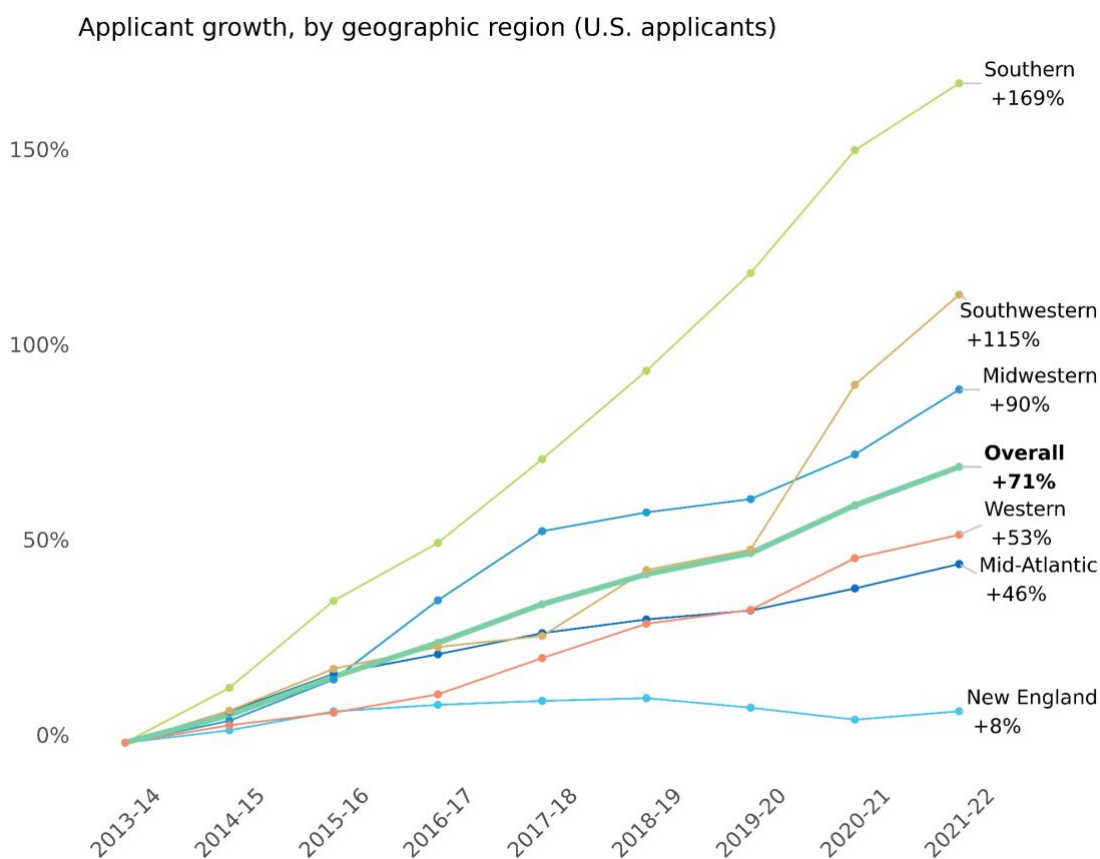
² These subgroups are not mutually exclusive, as many students identify across subgroups.

Geographic diversity: To what extent did trends vary across contexts?

Overall, we saw a large increase in both domestic applicants (applicants residing in the United States, +71% for an increase of over 457,000 applicants) and international applicants (+90%, for an increase of roughly 60,000 applicants) between 2013–14 and 2021–22.

Within the United States, we observed considerable variation across geographic regions. As we demonstrate in **Figure 3**, the largest relative increases in applicants since 2013–14 were observed in the Southern (+169%), Southwestern (+115%), and Midwestern (+90%) regions. They were smallest in the New England (+8%), Mid-Atlantic (+46%), and Western (+53%) regions. In **Appendix Table A2**, we present these trends with complete statistics for each season.

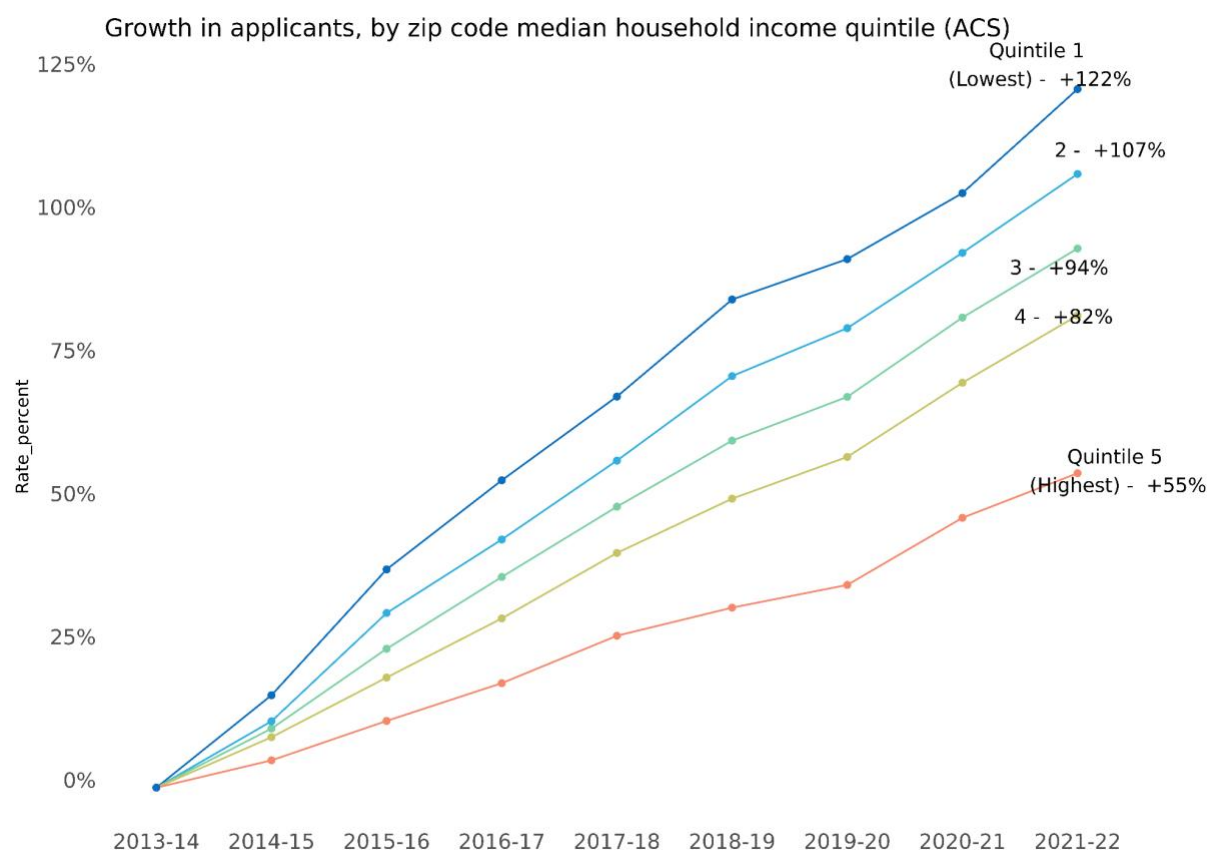
Figure 3: Increases in domestic applicants were largest in the South, Southwest, and Midwest



We also examined the extent to which increases in domestic applicants have varied across communities. To do this, we grouped zip codes by their estimated median household income captured in the American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau). In [previous research](#), we have noted that the majority of Common App applicants reside in the wealthiest 20% of U.S. zip codes. However, applicant counts in the lowest-income zip codes have generally increased at a higher rate than counts in more affluent zip codes. We demonstrate in **Figure 4** that between 2013–14 and 2021–22, Common App observed a 122% increase in applicants residing in the

lowest quintile of U.S. zip codes. Applicants from the second lowest quintile increased by 107%, while applicants from the third quintile increased by 94% and applicants from the fourth quintile increased by 82%. Applicants from the highest-income zip codes only increased 55%, below the rate (72%) observed for all Common App applicants. *Results indicate that the applicant pool has grown more socioeconomically diverse, at least as measured by the local economic characteristics of applicants' communities.* In **Appendix Table A3**, we present these trends with complete statistics for each season.

Figure 4: Applicant increases were largest in the lowest-income zip codes



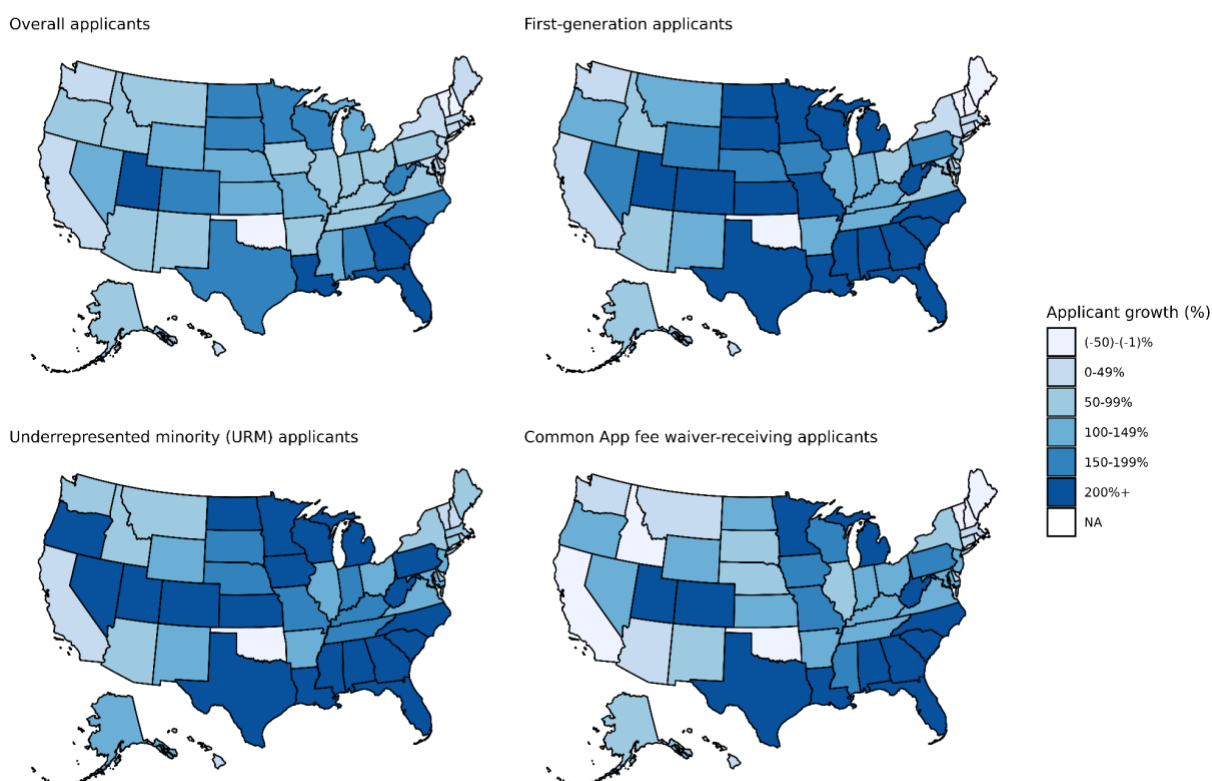
Variation in applicant growth trends across U.S. states

Just as applicant growth rates varied by demographic subgroups, we also observed that long-term increases in applicants varied meaningfully across U.S. states. In Figure 5, we present four U.S. state-level maps highlighting variation in applicant trends across states. In the top-left corner, we show trends in overall applicants, after which we present trends in first-generation, URM, and Common App fee-waiver-receiving applicants, respectively. We highlighted states on the basis of their respective growth rates over time (-50 to -1% decline since 2013–14, 0–49% increase, 50–99%, 100–149%, 150–199%, and 200% and above).

Overall, we find that increases were greatest in the Southeast region of the country. In 2021–22, states from Texas to Virginia saw more than triple the numbers of first-generation, URM, and fee-waiver recipients than in 2013–14. Growth was smallest in the Northeast region (particularly in New England), as well as in Oklahoma and parts of the Western region.

Figure 5. Applicant growth since 2013–14 was greatest in South, smallest in Northeast and along West Coast

Applicant growth since 2013-14



Linking applicant growth to Common App growth

Last season, we released a [research brief](#) describing the long-term trends in Common App's growth as a membership organization, namely its shift to include more public institutions and institutions with more inclusive admissions policies and practices. In the context of examining long-term changes in the profile of applicants using the Common App to apply to college, and how those changes vary across U.S. states, it is necessary to consider the role of Common App's changing membership. Many students apply to colleges that are closer to home, so we might expect applicant trends to reflect increases in Common App membership presence within each state. To examine this question, we present Figure 6, showing changes in applicant subgroup trends since 2013–14, by individual state. We highlight states where the public flagship institution, often the largest campus in the state, was added to the Common App membership in or after 2013–14.

Overall, Common App added public flagship institutions from 28 states to its membership after the 2012–13 season. In **Figure 6**, we assess growth trends for first-generation, URM, and Common App Fee Waiver recipients across states, and highlight whether or not those states' flagship institutions had joined the Common App since 2013–14. The blue circles in the graph reflect growth in states where the flagship institution joined the Common App since 2013–14,

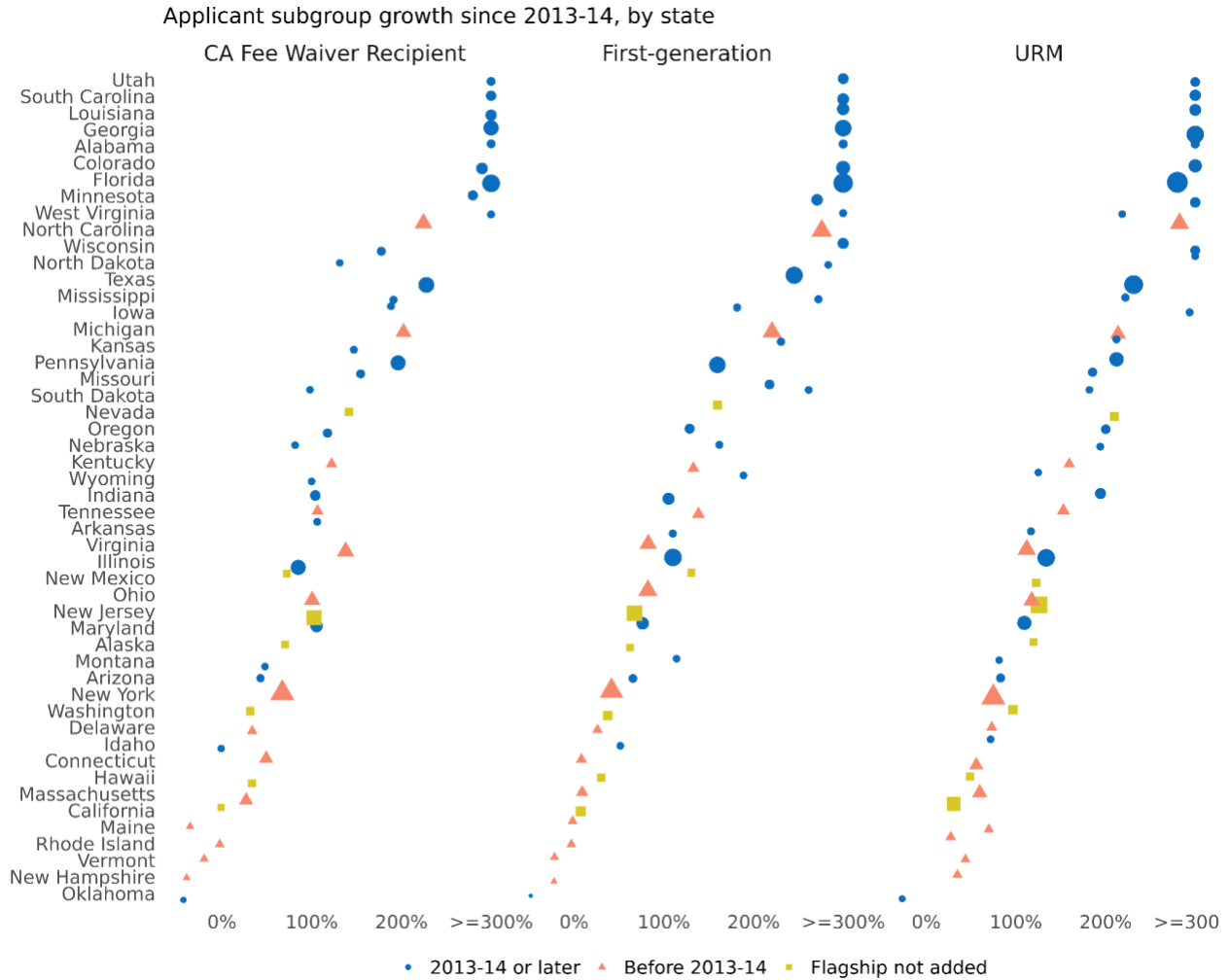
the gold squares reflect growth in states where the flagship institution did not join during this period, and the red triangles reflect the states where the public flagship joined prior to 2013–14.

We observe that the top end of the graph primarily presents blue circles, while the bottom of the graph primarily presents red triangles and gold squares. This theme clarifies the larger trend we observed: applicant diversity increased greatest in states where the large, public flagship institution joined the Common App membership since 2013–14. Specifically, nine of the ten states with the greatest growth in first-generation, URM, and fee waiver-receiving applicants (since 2013–14) were states where the flagship institution had joined Common App in or after 2013–14. On the other hand, this was only true in two of the ten states with the least growth within these applicant subgroups.

Finally, we note that several states' flagship institutions had joined the Common App membership prior to 2013–14, the first year of our analyses. Many of these states, indicated by the red triangles (mostly in New England and the Northeast region), are scattered along the bottom of Figure 6, indicating comparatively little growth in applicants since 2013–14. To the extent adding a public flagship is associated with trends in the state-level applicant pool, it is likely that these trends were in place and observable prior to 2013–14. Therefore, analysis of data from 2013–14 onward would not reveal a significant departure from existing trends. At the same time, it is also possible that these trends reflect broader graduation cohort trends in the region, where forecasts project declines in the coming years.

On the other hand, we observe a few states where the public flagship joined prior to 2013–14 and applicant trends since 2013–14 reflect meaningful growth. These states, including Michigan, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, each border multiple states wherein the public flagship did join Common App since 2013–14, so it is possible that applicants from the states joining the Common App membership have contributed to the overall applicant growth in the states that border them. We also report these results in **Appendix Table A4**, grouping states by whether and when the flagship institution joined the Common App membership and sorting them by the overall increase in applicants from 2013–14 to 2021–22.

Figure 6. Public flagship membership predicted state-level increases in historically underrepresented applicants



Finally, we examined changes in the member population across the states in the Southeast region of the United States, where increases in underrepresented applicants were most concentrated. We found that many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that joined the Common App are located in these states. Common App has explicitly prioritized expanding its membership to include more Minority Serving Institutions³ (MSIs), of which HBCUs are a part, and growth among these institutions may have promoted additional increases in the diversity of the Common App applicant pool.

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

Conclusion

Common App has sought to make its application platform, and the advantages of the streamlined applicant experience it is designed to provide, accessible for a larger, more diverse group of students. With access to this resource, students can easily broaden their college searches and find the college that best fits their interests and needs. Results in this research brief indicate that Common App has made considerable progress in making the application platform more accessible to a more diverse group of students, specifically first-generation, URM, and fee waiver-receiving students.

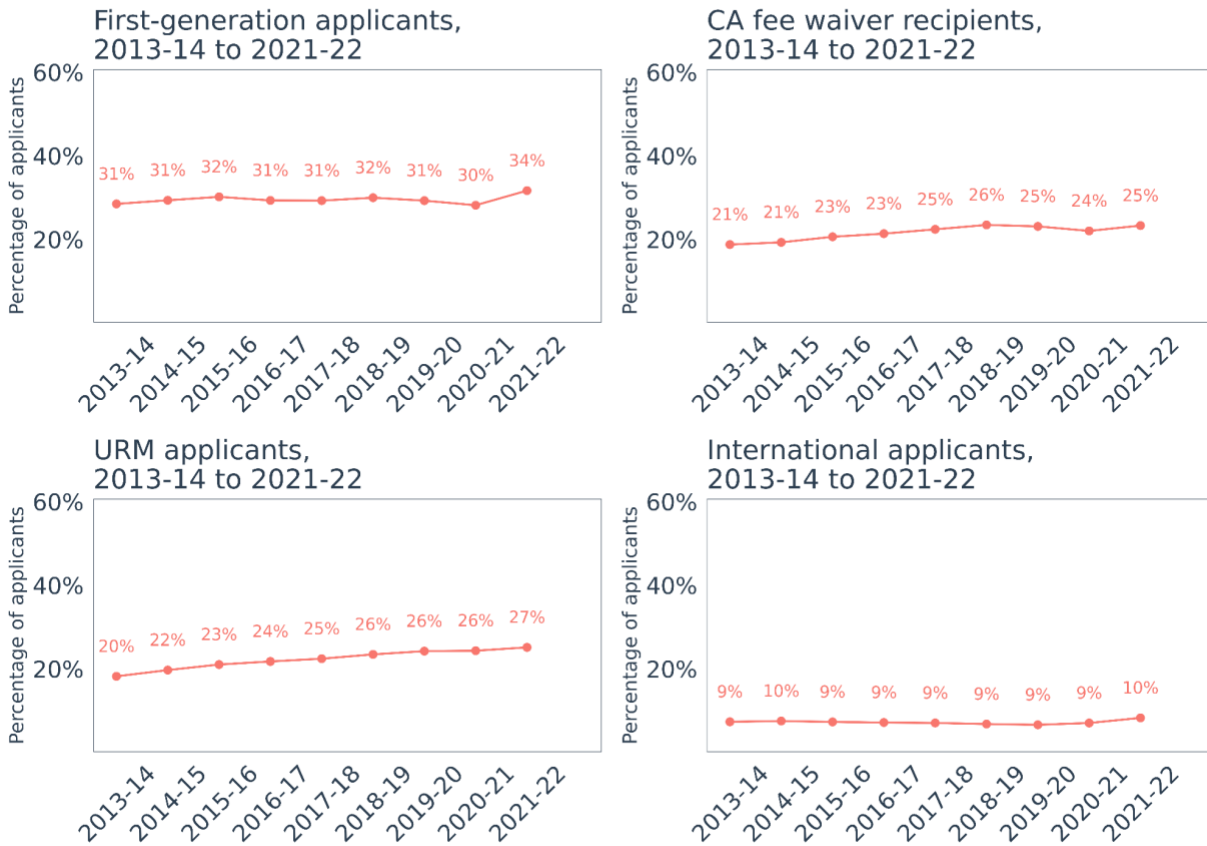
Total applicant counts for these subgroups have grown at rates that exceed the overall rate for the Common App applicant pool. Since 2013–14, the number of applicants from each of these subgroups has more than doubled. This growth varied by region, however, as we saw that increases in applicants, specifically underrepresented applicants, were greatest in the Southeast and smallest in the Northeast and along the West Coast. Finally, we found that applicant growth trends were greatest in those states where the large, public flagship institution had recently joined the Common App membership. This finding indicates that these public flagships may be attracting new, more diverse students to the Common App platform. Once there, these students are able to navigate the app and search from a membership profile that now exceeds 1,000 colleges and universities for the 2022–23 season.

Common App has transformed its membership over the past decade, as we have detailed in previous research. Our analyses indicate that this transformation is very closely associated with a dramatic shift in the population of students using the platform. In addition to its efforts to reduce complexity and burden in the application process, and to pilot various interventions to eliminate barriers in the application process, Common App considers its membership expansion strategy to be central to its mission to expand access and equity in college admissions. The results from this research brief, while promising, also clearly identify opportunities for further growth in order to ensure that all students, wherever they are, can access a college application process that is clear and transparent.

Appendix

Appendix Figure A1. Composition of first-generation, fee waiver-receiving, and URM applicants increased meaningfully since 2013–14.

Changes in the composition of the applicant pool



Appendix Table A1. Growth rates among historically underrepresented students far outpaced the overall trend (includes both domestic and international applicants)

Applicant growth over time										
Overall and by demographic subgroup										
	Applicants									Growth (%) ¹
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	
All applicants										
Overall	719,517	771,967	840,667	901,831	971,691	1,023,798	1,060,567	1,153,321	1,240,678	72%
Race/ethnicity										
American Indian or Alaska Native	1,836	2,111	2,324	2,074	2,103	2,360	2,254	2,470	2,752	50%
Asian	67,456	69,203	72,737	77,718	88,633	92,918	98,290	107,564	115,453	71%
Black or African American	58,668	70,063	84,016	91,090	100,951	108,645	115,277	126,252	139,588	138%
Latinx	84,575	94,889	106,907	120,819	133,940	149,333	160,456	174,651	193,851	129%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1,126	1,291	1,268	1,317	1,380	1,376	1,363	1,592	1,763	57%
Nonresident Alien	73,176	80,495	86,396	90,944	96,493	97,249	97,212	108,215	127,555	74%
Two or More Races	27,529	29,326	32,784	37,361	42,246	45,632	48,516	52,543	56,099	104%
Unknown	20,675	33,592	35,423	34,842	34,847	36,432	31,800	33,132	33,781	63%
White	384,476	390,997	418,812	445,666	471,098	489,853	505,399	546,902	569,836	48%
URM										
Not URM	573,312	603,613	646,152	686,531	733,317	762,084	781,217	848,356	902,724	57%
URM	146,205	168,354	194,515	215,300	238,374	261,714	279,350	304,965	337,954	131%
First-generation status										
First-generation	220,045	242,769	271,266	283,363	304,783	328,326	332,615	349,022	418,871	90%
Not first-generation	499,472	529,198	569,401	618,468	666,908	695,472	727,952	804,299	821,807	65%
Fee waiver receipt										
No	569,404	606,826	649,650	690,177	733,584	762,173	793,225	875,113	925,505	63%
Yes	150,113	165,141	191,017	211,654	238,107	261,625	267,342	278,208	315,173	110%

¹ Note: Growth (%) reflects growth between 2013-14 and 2021-22

Appendix Table A2. Growth in domestic applicants was most pronounced in the South, Southwest, and Midwest

Applicant growth over time

By applicant region (domestic applicants)

	Applicants									Growth (%) ¹
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	
Mid-Atlantic	194,176	209,644	228,346	238,134	248,640	255,460	259,897	270,877	283,028	46%
Midwestern	118,796	125,456	137,992	162,110	183,152	188,866	192,912	206,517	226,248	90%
New England	95,916	98,949	103,605	105,207	106,165	106,843	104,507	101,555	103,616	8%
Overall	651,587	697,639	761,546	818,189	882,631	932,617	968,022	1,047,718	1,111,901	71%
Southern	93,551	106,675	127,543	141,416	161,477	182,652	206,092	235,525	251,568	169%
Southwestern	30,703	33,211	36,509	38,223	39,091	44,275	45,890	58,853	65,934	115%
Western	118,445	123,704	127,551	133,099	144,106	154,521	158,724	174,391	181,507	53%

¹ Note: Growth (%) reflects growth between 2013-14 and 2021-22.

Appendix Table A3. Growth in domestic applicants was most pronounced in less affluent zip codes

Applicant growth over time

By quintile of ZIP code median household income

	Applicants									Growth (%) ¹
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	
Quintile 1 (Lowest)	33,237	38,602	45,902	51,072	55,934	61,564	63,909	67,735	73,774	122%
2	46,566	51,964	60,766	66,740	73,156	80,025	83,926	90,049	96,460	107%
3	64,195	70,814	79,763	87,808	95,686	103,087	107,994	116,882	124,623	94%
4	109,578	119,232	130,647	141,954	154,483	164,861	172,851	187,044	199,902	82%
Quintile 5 (Highest)	394,957	413,785	440,969	467,010	499,696	519,072	534,726	581,009	611,772	55%

¹ Note: Growth (%) reflects growth between 2013-14 and 2021-22. ZIP code median household income estimates from American Community Survey.

Appendix Table A4. Growth was generally greater in states where the flagship had joined Common App during the analysis period (2013–14).

Applicant subgroup growth since 2013-14				
By state, among members who added flagships since 2013-14				
State	Overall	First-generation	URM	CA Fee Waiver Recipient
Utah	625%	1 247%	1 163%	585%
Louisiana	532%	815%	610%	601%
South Carolina	281%	430%	466%	320%
Florida	252%	338%	280%	302%
Georgia	240%	429%	387%	336%
Colorado	192%	403%	400%	290%
Wisconsin	186%	346%	332%	178%
South Dakota	162%	262%	182%	98%
North Dakota	161%	283%	789%	131%
Alabama	160%	307%	307%	301%
Minnesota	157%	271%	350%	280%
West Virginia	152%	325%	219%	331%
Mississippi	137%	272%	222%	191%
Wyoming	119%	189%	125%	100%
Kansas	115%	231%	212%	147%
Missouri	113%	218%	186%	155%
Nebraska	111%	162%	194%	82%
Oregon	100%	129%	200%	118%
Pennsylvania	98%	160%	212%	196%
Iowa	96%	182%	294%	189%
Illinois	84%	110%	134%	85%
Indiana	82%	105%	194%	104%
Arkansas	79%	110%	117%	106%
Arizona	63%	66%	83%	43%
Montana	60%	114%	81%	48%
Idaho	58%	52%	72%	-1%
Maryland	46%	76%	110%	105%
Oklahoma	-39%	-48%	-27%	-43%

Appendix Table A4 (Continued).

Applicant subgroup growth since 2013-14				
By state, among members who added flagships before 2013-14				
State	Overall	First-generation	URM	CA Fee Waiver Recipient
North Carolina	175%	276%	283%	225%
Michigan	112%	221%	214%	202%
Tennessee	97%	139%	153%	107%
Kentucky	83%	133%	160%	122%
Virginia	64%	83%	112%	138%
Ohio	55%	82%	118%	101%
New York	32%	42%	75%	67%
Delaware	26%	26%	73%	34%
Massachusetts	13%	9%	60%	27%
Maine	12%	-2%	70%	-36%
Connecticut	7%	8%	56%	49%
Rhode Island	1%	-3%	27%	-2%
New Hampshire	-5%	-22%	35%	-39%
Vermont	-8%	-22%	44%	-20%

Appendix Table A4 (Continued).

Applicant subgroup growth since 2013-14				
By state, among members who never added flagship				
State	Overall	First-generation	URM	CA Fee Waiver Recipient
Texas	154%	245%	231%	228%
Nevada	107%	160%	210%	141%
New Mexico	74%	131%	123%	72%
Alaska	53%	63%	120%	70%
New Jersey	41%	67%	126%	103%
Washington	39%	37%	97%	31%
Hawaii	36%	30%	49%	33%
California	24%	7%	31%	-1%