

# Early admission deadlines: Student trends and implications

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## Introduction

When applying to college, students must select both where and when to submit their applications. For some students, this means applying via an early admissions deadline. Many colleges and universities offer early admissions deadlines, including Early Decision (ED) and Early Action (EA). These deadlines allow a) applicants to signal top choices and gain early clarity on admissions offers, and b) institutions to gather timely projections for their entering classes. [Previous work from Common App](#) showed differences in the composition of application pools across deadlines, but much is left to learn about who does and does not choose to apply early.

In this research brief, we use data from the Common App data warehouse to explore the prevalence of applying early (applying either EA or ED) and the characteristics of students who use and do not use early deadlines. Analyses reveal large gaps across demographic subgroups in rates of applying early. We find that the characteristics of applicants' communities (both the college attainment of local adults and local median household income) are highly predictive of applying EA and ED, even when comparing applicants with similar academic backgrounds (GPA and SAT scores).

**Note:** All data are from first-year applications submitted via Common App

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## Key findings

1. **Early Decision (ED) and Early Action (EA) deadlines have grown slightly more popular in recent years.**

Only 13% of applicants submitted at least one ED application in 2022–23 (compared to 11% in 2014–15). Meanwhile, over half (53%) applied EA in 2022–23 (up from 45% in 2014–15).

2. **We observe large demographic disparities in who applies early.**

Asian students were most likely to apply ED, while White and Multiracial students were most likely to apply EA. Meanwhile, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Native American or Alaska Native, and Latinx applicants were least likely to apply via either early deadline type. First-generation applicants and applicants reporting eligibility for a Common App fee waiver (a proxy for low-income status) demonstrated particularly low rates of applying early (ED or EA). We also find that, relative to their peers, historically underrepresented applicants submitted their first application later in the season. This may reflect meaningful gaps in resources that support students' efforts to apply early.

3. **Applying early is closely associated with the educational and socioeconomic characteristics of applicants' home communities.**

Using data from the American Community Survey (2017–2021 5-year estimates), we find that students residing in the most highly educated communities (wherein at least 80% of adults held a bachelor's degree (BA)) were more likely than those in other communities to apply ED or EA — even when comparing students with similar GPAs or SAT scores. *We observe that students scoring below a 1250 on the SAT (or below a 3.0 GPA), but residing in the most highly educated ZIP codes, were **more** likely to apply ED or EA than students scoring at or above a 1500 (or above a 3.8 GPA) but living in the least highly educated ZIP codes (where less than 20% of adults held a BA).*

## Applying early: Early Decision and Early Action

Before presenting trends on early admissions deadlines, it is necessary to clarify distinctions between these deadlines that can be confusing to students and families. Perhaps most widely publicized is the Early Decision (ED) deadline. When applying ED, students enter into a binding commitment to attend the school to which they applied if admitted. Less commonly understood about ED plans, however, is that admitted [students are typically allowed to leave the commitment](#) if the financial aid package offered is insufficient for the student to attend. Nonetheless, ED applications are intended to signal intent to enroll if admitted. Available research has found distinct admission [advantages to applying ED](#), suggesting that it would be helpful to students to apply ED to a school if they felt strongly about their preference to attend.

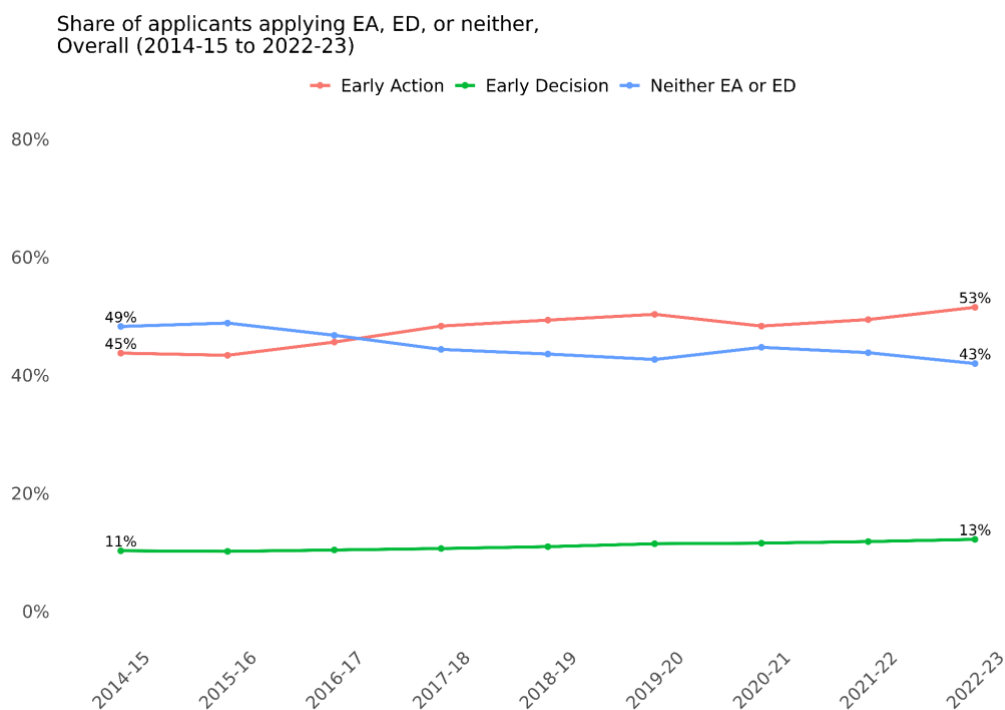
Early Action (EA), on the other hand, does not require a commitment on the part of the student, aside from that required to identify and apply to the institution as early as the November before the next Fall semester. One less common type of EA deadline, Restrictive Early Action, is somewhat similar to ED in that it requires that students withdraw any other early applications upon applying via this deadline. For these analyses, as Restrictive EA comprises a small share of EA applications, we include Restrictive EA within broader EA application and applicant analyses.

In sum, ED is typically viewed as a commitment to attend, contingent upon financial aid offer details, while EA is most commonly used as an early signal of serious interest, without the commitment.

## How common is applying ED, EA?

After differentiating between the pathways students may choose when applying early, we assessed how often students applied via these deadlines. In **Figure 1**, we show that while over half of all applicants (53%) applied EA, just 13% of students applied ED in 2022–23. These percentages have increased since 2014–15 (+8pp for EA, +2pp for ED) and are not mutually exclusive, as applicants can submit applications via both deadlines. Overall, about 58% of applicants applied either EA or ED in 2022–23. Therefore, 43% of applicants never applied early in 2022–23. This share decreased significantly from a high of 50% in 2015–16. Taken together, these results indicate that applying early is increasingly common within the Common App platform, but this is largely the result of applying via less restrictive EA deadlines.

**Figure 1. Applying early grew more common between 2014–15 and 2022–23**



## Who applies early?

Given the differences between the institutions that offer ED or EA and those that do not, we confine the remaining analyses in this research brief to those applicants applying to at least one institution that offered either ED or EA (the analyses in this paper include data from over 1.2 million applicants). This ensures any disparities we find are not simply capturing differences in where students apply.

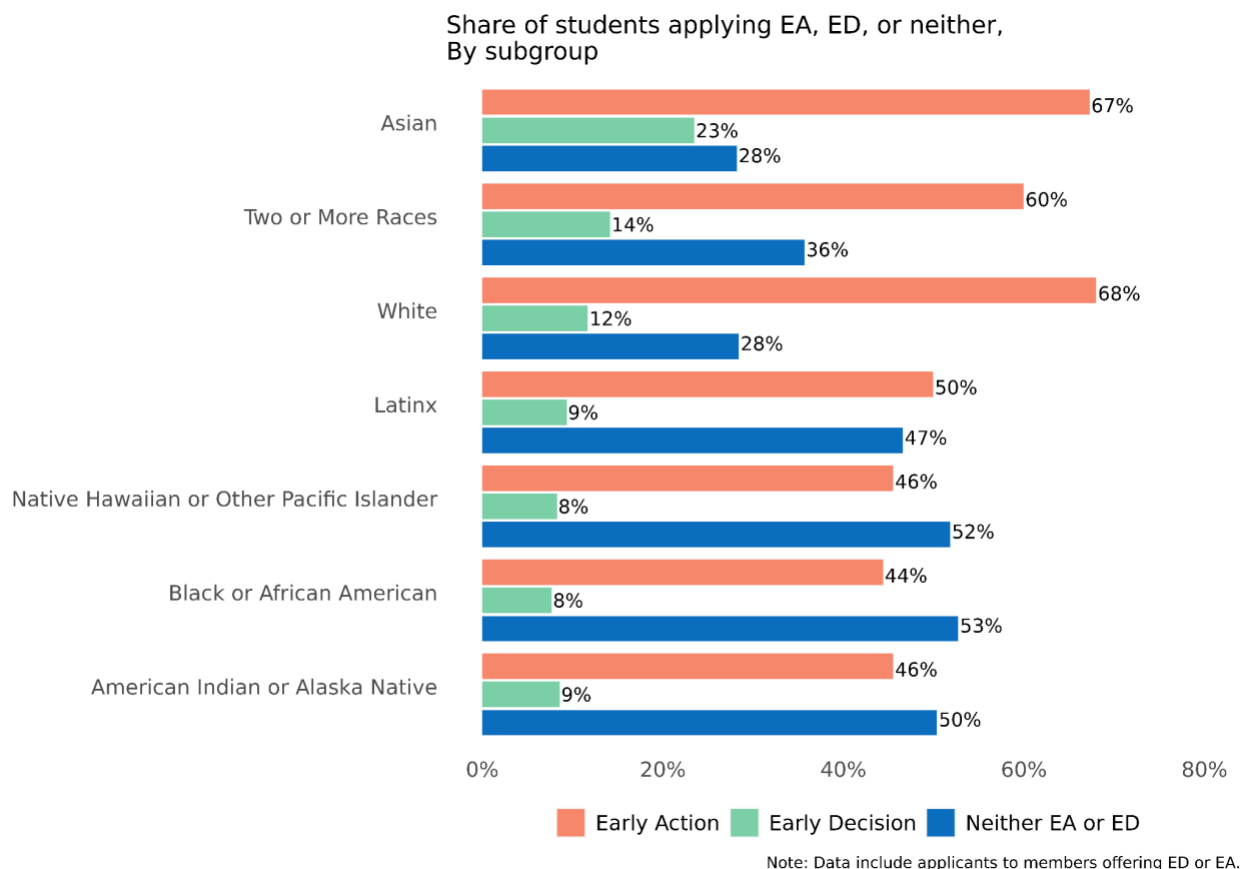
### Applying early, by demographic characteristics

Between 2014–15 and 2022–23, the overall share of applicants applying either ED or EA (applicants submitting at least one ED or one EA application) increased from 51% to 58% (see **Figure 1** above). This trend emerged while the Common App membership has [increased over time](#) and now includes more members offering EA plans. To clarify analyses of subgroup differences in applying early, we focus on the 2022–23 season from this point forward.

In **Figure 2**, we present rates of applying early, for ED and EA, by applicant race/ethnicity. Overall, we see that Asian, multiracial, and White applicants were most likely to apply early. Asian applicants were most likely to apply ED (23%), but over two thirds (68%) of White applicants applied EA (12% applied ED). Meanwhile, Latinx and Black or African American applicants were most likely to use only regular or rolling deadlines in their applications (47% and 53%, respectively). Perhaps most notably, *Asian applicants were over twice as likely to apply ED (23%) as either Latinx or Black or African American applicants (9% and 8%, respectively).*

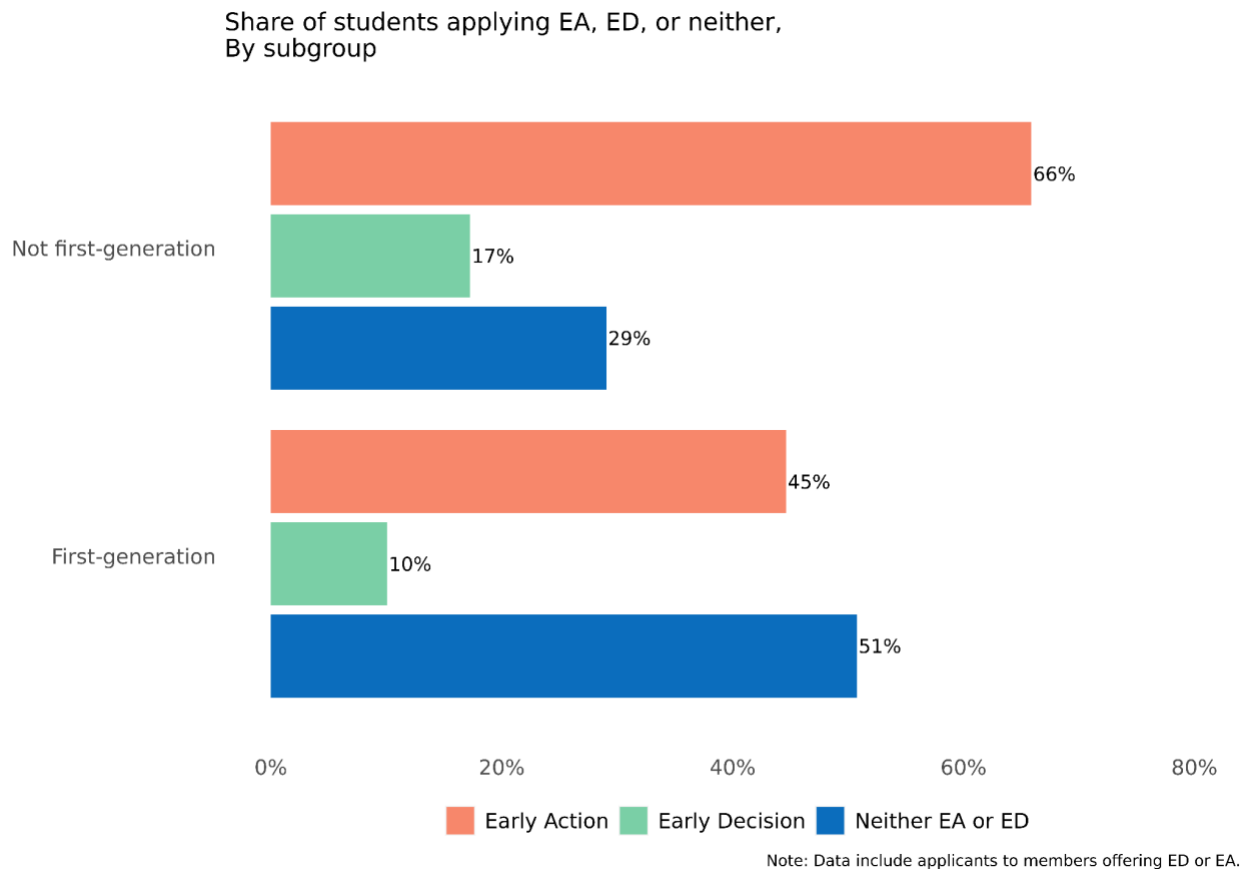
**Note:** percentages for each subgroup may exceed 100%, as ED and EA are not mutually exclusive.

**Figure 2: Applying early was most common for Asian, biracial, and White applicants.**



Next, we assessed differences in early deadline applying based on whether or not applicants identified as first-generation college students. In **Figure 3**, we show that first-generation applicants were 1.75 times as likely to use no early deadlines (51%) as their non-first-gen, or continuing-gen, peers (29%). Continuing-generation applicants were 1.7 times as likely to apply ED (17% vs. 10%) and also more likely to apply EA (66% vs. 45%).

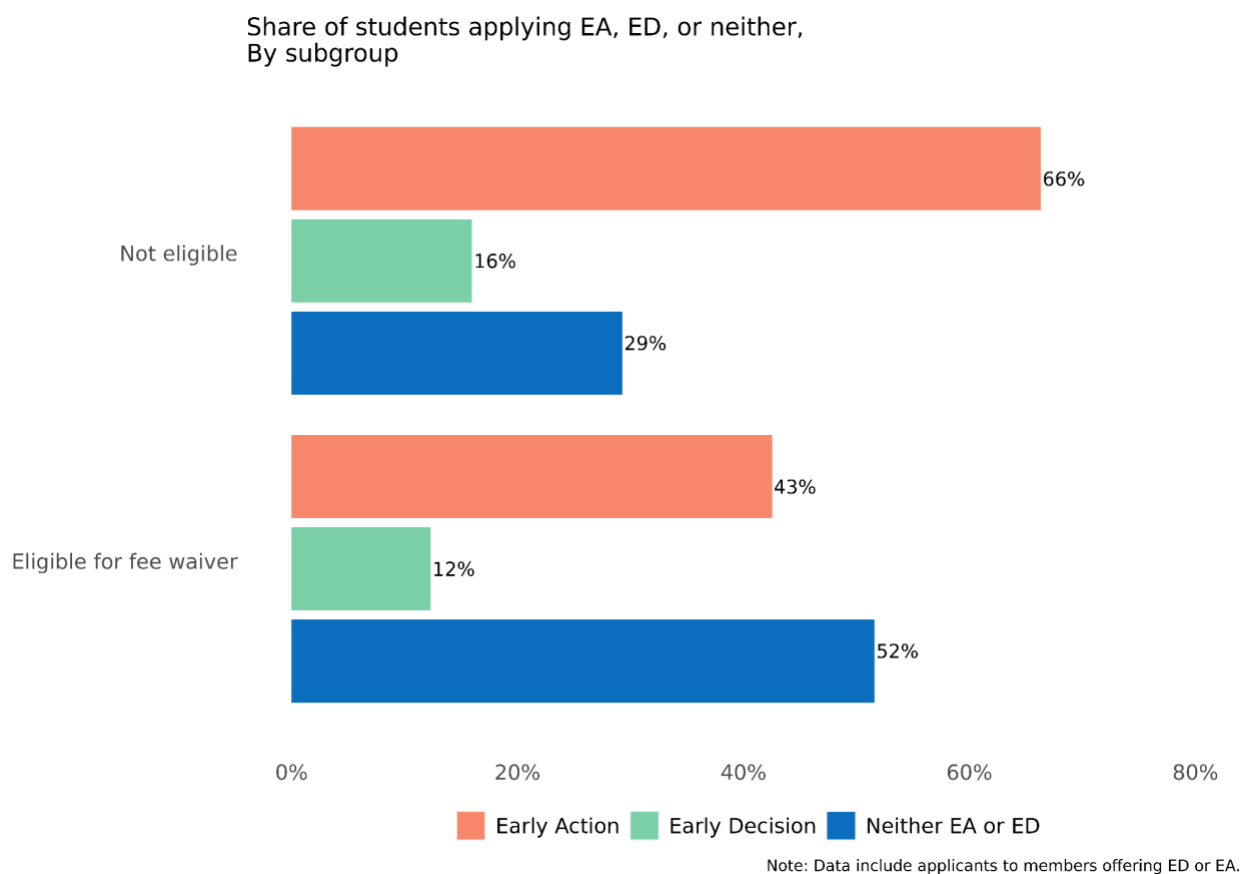
**Figure 3: First-generation applicants were less likely to apply either ED or EA.**



Finally, we present the same comparison, but group applicants by whether or not they reported eligibility for a Common App fee waiver. Results from **Figure 4** closely resemble those from **Figure 3** such that a) a far larger share of fee waiver-eligible applicants never applied early (52% vs. 29%), and b) applicants that did not report eligibility for a fee waiver were significantly more likely than applicants reporting eligibility to apply either ED or EA.

In sum, the preceding three figures highlight meaningful differences across demographic subgroups and suggest early deadlines are far less frequently used pathways for students historically underrepresented in higher education. *As these analyses only include students applying to members that offer ED or EA admissions plans, these differences are not simply a function of differences in where applicants apply.*

**Figure 4. Fee waiver-eligible applicants were less likely to apply ED, EA.**



### Applying early, by community characteristics

Applying early is generally regarded as a strategic behavior, one which may be influenced by an informed perspective on college admissions. This perspective can develop from the support of counselors and parents/guardians, as well as peers, who have insight into the nuances of the college admissions process. In this context, such knowledge could be helpful for applicants wondering whether and how to apply via early admissions deadlines.

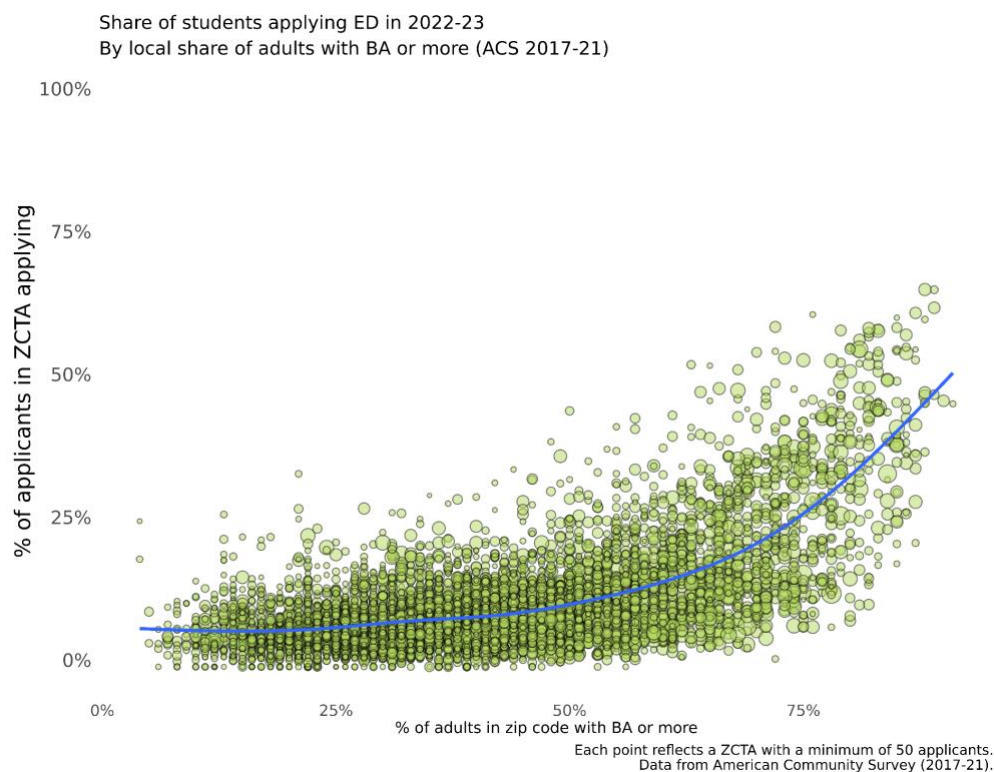
As such, characteristics of the communities where students live and go to school may be associated with decisions to apply early. To gain a descriptive understanding of this association, we linked applicant data to ZIP code-level data from the American Community Survey (2017–21) to assess prevalence of applying early across communities with varying socioeconomic and educational characteristics. In this report, we examine the extent to which applying early varied across communities with different levels of college attainment among local adults (as measured by the share of adults in the ZIP code with at least a bachelor’s degree – or BA).

First, we present **Figure 5**, which plots all ZIP codes with at least 50 applicants (over 76% of all applicants included) along two axes. The horizontal axis, or x-axis, reflects the share of adults in the ZIP code with at least a BA. The vertical axis (y-axis) reflects the share of applicants in that ZIP code who applied ED. In general, we see that fewer than one in four applicants (25%) applied ED in the majority of ZIP codes. However, in the most highly-educated communities,

where upwards of 75% of adults held at least a BA, we find that ED applying was substantially more common. Comparing the left- and right-hand sides of this graph, we see that applicants in the most highly-educated communities were often twice as likely to apply ED as their peers in communities where fewer than 25% of adults held a BA.

**Note:** we also examine the relationship between ED applying and ZIP code-level median household income. Local educational attainment appears more closely correlated with ED applying than income, but we include the figure for clarity in **Appendix Figure 1A**.

**Figure 5. ED applying was somewhat rare in all but the most highly educated ZIP codes.**

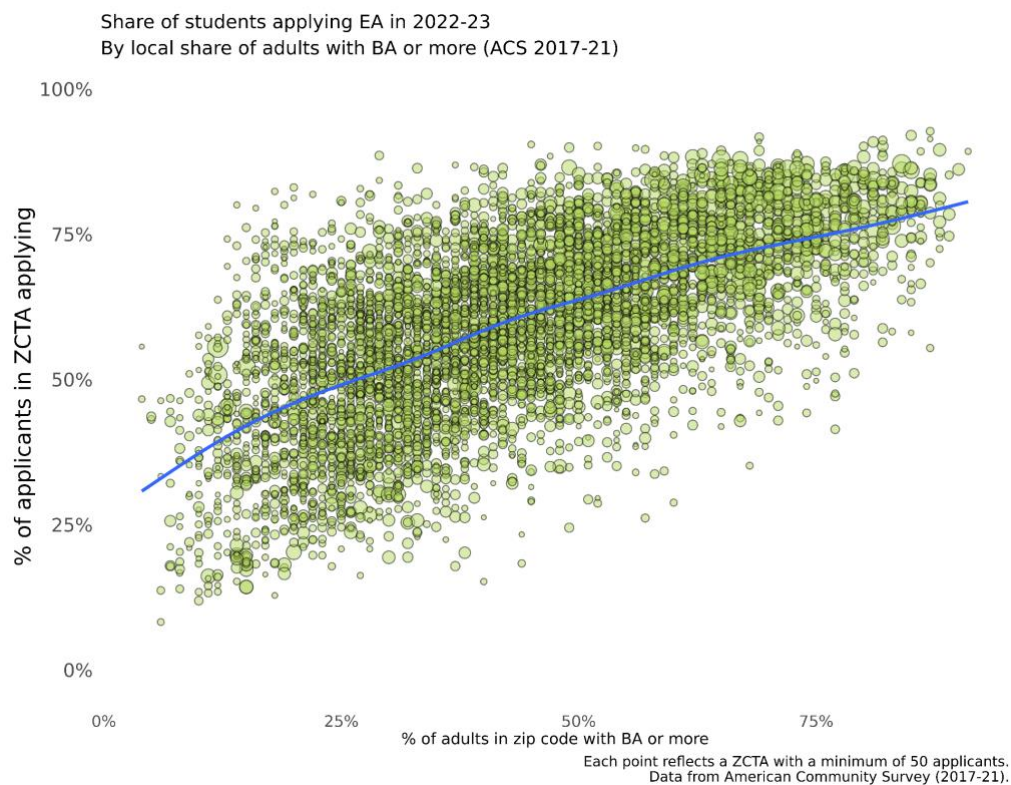


Next, we present in **Figure 6** a similar plot that reflects EA applying across ZIP codes. We see that EA applying is substantially more common than ED applying (see **Figure 1**), but we note meaningful variation, nonetheless. Most notably, we see very high EA applying rates in the vast majority of the most highly educated communities, while we generally see lower, yet highly variable, rates across less highly educated communities. Taken together, **Figures 5 and 6** suggest that applying early was most common in communities where the vast majority of adults had graduated from college themselves.

**Note:** In **Appendix Figure A2**, we show a similar graph but plot ZIP codes by their median household income. This suggests students in the most affluent ZIP codes were most likely to apply early.



**Figure 6. EA applying was more common than ED, but variation was greatest in least highly educated communities.**



One possible interpretation of these results is that many applicants from highly educated communities could be especially well prepared for college and thus competitive in early admissions processes. As a result, they may be more likely to apply early than peers in other communities. Another interpretation might be that applicants from highly educated communities often have access to resources, whether personal, informational, or financial, that ensure they can both select target schools and meet early application deadlines. Such resources may include, for example, college counseling, peers who also navigated early admissions processes, college preparatory programs within their high schools, time to begin compiling application materials several months in advance, or financial assets that make the notion of submitting a binding agreement to enroll (in the case of ED) less stressful.

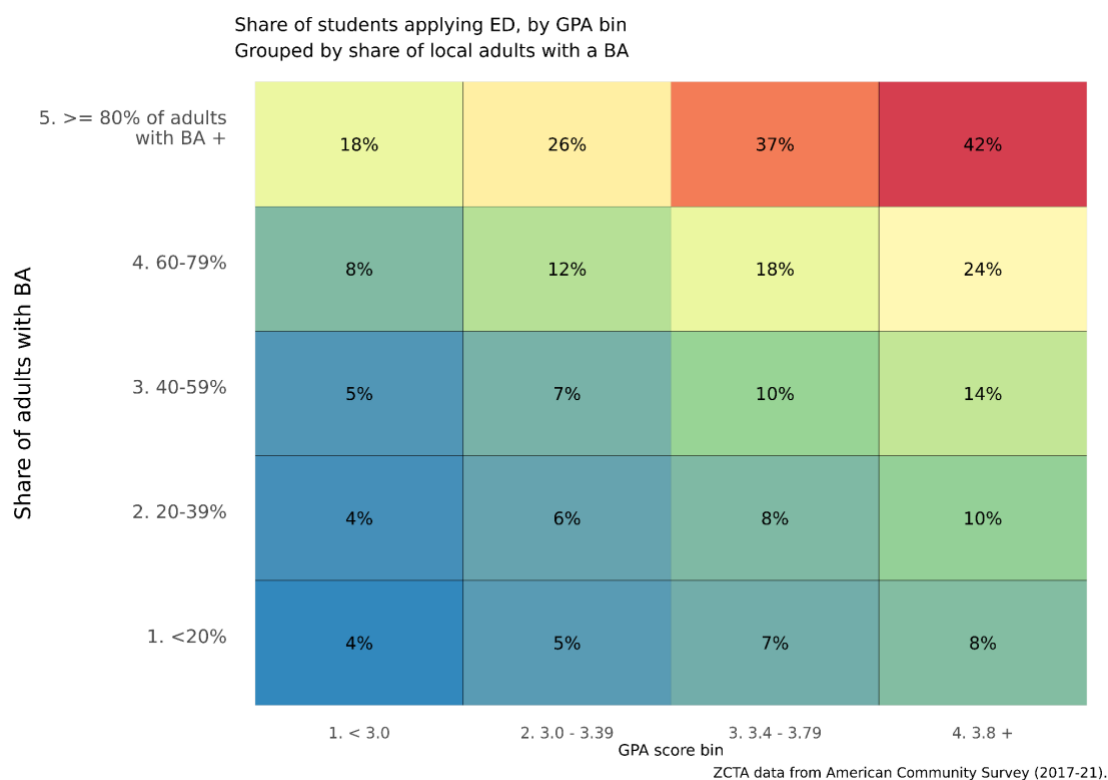
To better understand the relationship between applying early and the characteristics of applicants' communities, we examine the extent to which accounting for students' academic performance, via either high school GPA or SAT scores, explained differences across communities in rates of applying early. *Simply put, if students with similar academic characteristics, but from different communities, are applying early at different rates, academic characteristics likely explain less of the difference than where students live and go to school.*

In **Figure 7**, we present a heat map that groups applicants on two measures – high school GPA and the share of adults in the applicant's home ZIP code with at least a BA. For each set of applicants, we present the share who applied ED in 2022–23. Colors correspond to the percentage of students in that group who applied ED, ranging from blue (lower percentages) to

red (higher percentages). First, reading the graph from left to right, we see applicants with higher GPAs were more likely to apply ED. This is true in each row, from top to bottom.

Next, we see that much of the first column, highlighting applicants with GPAs below 3.0, is colored blue (<10% applying ED), aside from the two subgroups with the highest shares of adults with a BA. Eight percent of applicants with GPAs below 3.0, who also resided in communities where 60–79% of adults held a BA, applied ED at least once. This rate was more than doubled, at 18%, for applicants with similar GPAs in communities where at least 80% of adults held a BA.

**Figure 7. GPA alone did not explain differences in ED applying.**



ED applying rates were always largest for students residing in the most highly educated communities. To take one example, consider the fourth column (applicants with a GPA at or above 3.8). Here, we see that 42% of applicants from the most highly educated communities applied ED (top-right rectangle). Meanwhile, applicants from communities where fewer than 60% of adults held a BA (bottom three rectangles in the right-most column) applied ED far less frequently (14%, 10%, and 8%, respectively).

Perhaps the most striking takeaway from this graph is that rates of applying early seemed to vary more across communities than across different GPA score bins. Specifically, note that 18% of applicants who resided in the most highly educated communities, and applied with a GPA below 3.0, applied ED (top-left rectangle). This was meaningfully greater than the share of applicants with at least a 3.8 GPA who resided in communities where fewer than 60% of adults held a BA (bottom three rectangles in the right-most column).

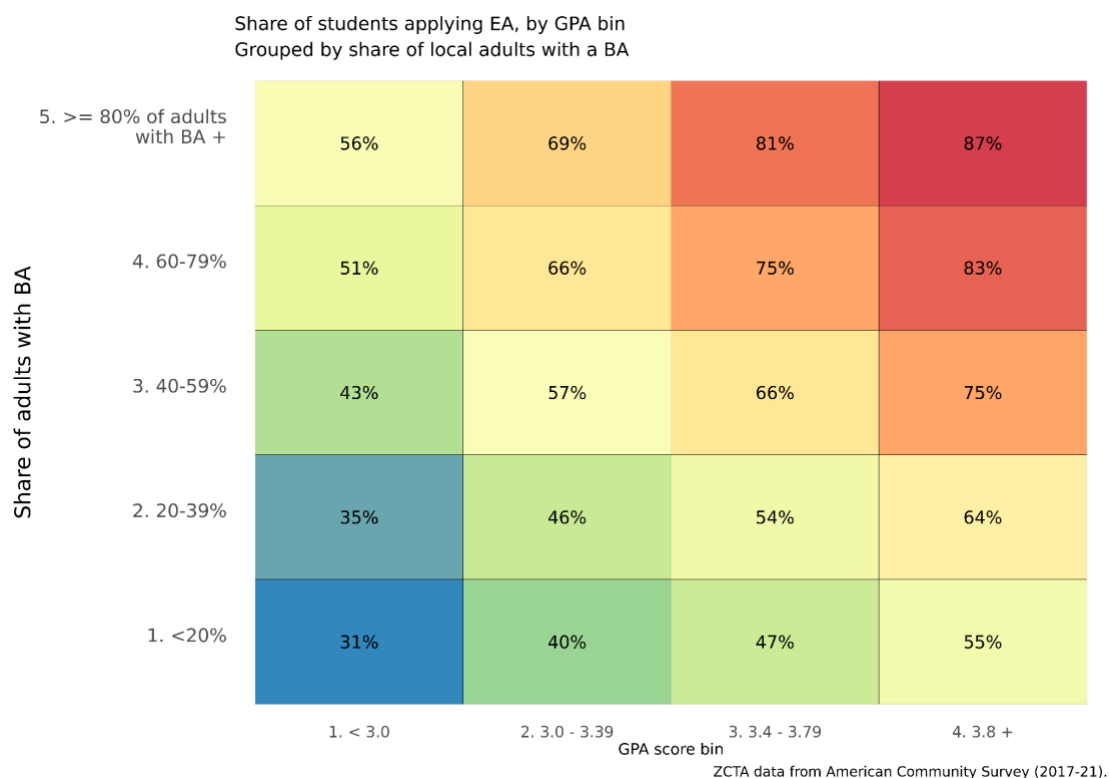
In **Appendix Figure A3**, we present a similar heat map, but use SAT score bins as a measure of academic performance instead of high school GPA. The results are largely similar. We interpret from these analyses that community factors, including financial resources and informational access, more strongly predict ED applying than academic performance.

In **Figure 8**, we show a similar graph to summarize differences across contexts in applying EA. As we might expect from earlier figures, we see that EA applying was more common across communities than ED. However, we note similar variation across communities when reviewing ED and EA applying behaviors. First, we note the first (left-most) column, where all applicants applied with a GPA below 3.0. Here, we show that 56% of applicants in the most highly educated communities applied EA, compared to just 31% of applicants in the least highly educated communities. This relationship extends to the right-hand column, where all applicants reported a GPA at or above 3.8. Here, 87% of applicants residing in the most highly educated communities applied EA. This was much higher than the 55% of applicants applying EA in the least highly educated communities (where fewer than 20% of adults held a BA).

Again, similar to the ED graph, we see the students with the highest GPAs who resided in the least highly educated communities were less likely to apply EA than students with much lower GPAs who resided in highly educated communities. For example, consider the top row of the second column from the left. This rectangle represents the share (69%) of applicants in the most highly educated communities, with GPAs between 3.0–3.39, who applied EA. This rate is considerably higher than the share of applicants with GPAs at or above a 3.8 who resided in communities where fewer than 40% of adults held a BA (bottom two rows of right-most column: 64% and 55%, respectively). We present a similar graph that groups the data by applicants' SAT score bins, in **Appendix Figure A4**, and the interpretation is the same. *In sum, we see that applying ED and EA vary dramatically with the characteristics of students' communities.*

**Note:** We also tested whether this relationship held when grouping communities based on median household income. The results were largely similar.

**Figure 8. GPA alone did not explain differences in EA applying.**



Next, we explored whether underrepresented students submitted their first application later, on average, than their peers. If so, this may suggest that the resources necessary to apply early are barriers to many students doing so, particularly if these differences emerge when comparing students who applied to the same set of institutions. We compared the distribution of first application submission dates (“when did students submit their first application?”) for underrepresented students and their peers. In **Appendix Figure A5**, we present frequency plots of first application timing, comparing underrepresented minority (URM<sup>1</sup>) applicants to non-URM applicants, first-generation applicants to continuing generation applicants, fee waiver-eligible applicants to non-fee waiver-eligible applicants, applicants from lower-income communities (first and second quintiles of median household income) to applicants from lower- and upper-income communities, and, finally, applicants from communities where 50% or fewer adults held a BA or more to applicants from communities where more than 50% of adults held a BA or more.

If application timing patterns were similar across comparison groups, we would see that the orange and blue lines would follow identical patterns across the application season. Instead, in each plot, we find the blue bars representing underrepresented subgroups fall below the orange bars during the early deadline period. This indicates that underrepresented students were less likely to submit their first application in October or early November (see first dotted line, indicating November 1). We can also see that the blue bars reach higher than the orange bars later in the season, indicating that the share of underrepresented students submitting their first

<sup>1</sup> 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.

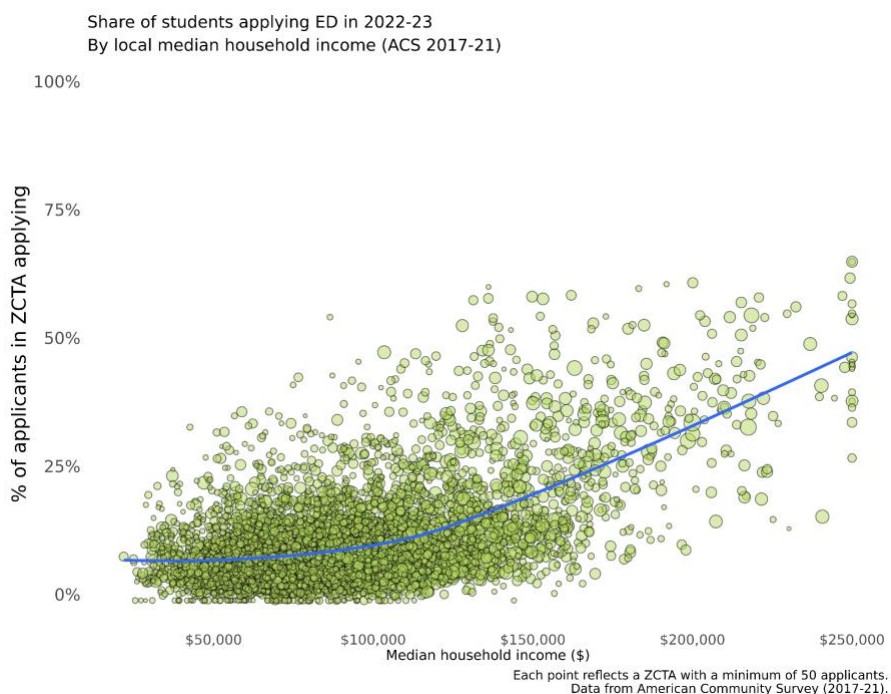
application later is larger than the share of their peers doing so (see second dotted line on the right-hand side of each graph, indicating January 1). Taken together, these findings suggest that early deadlines may present timing and resource barriers for historically underrepresented students, who are less likely to apply early in the season.

## Conclusion

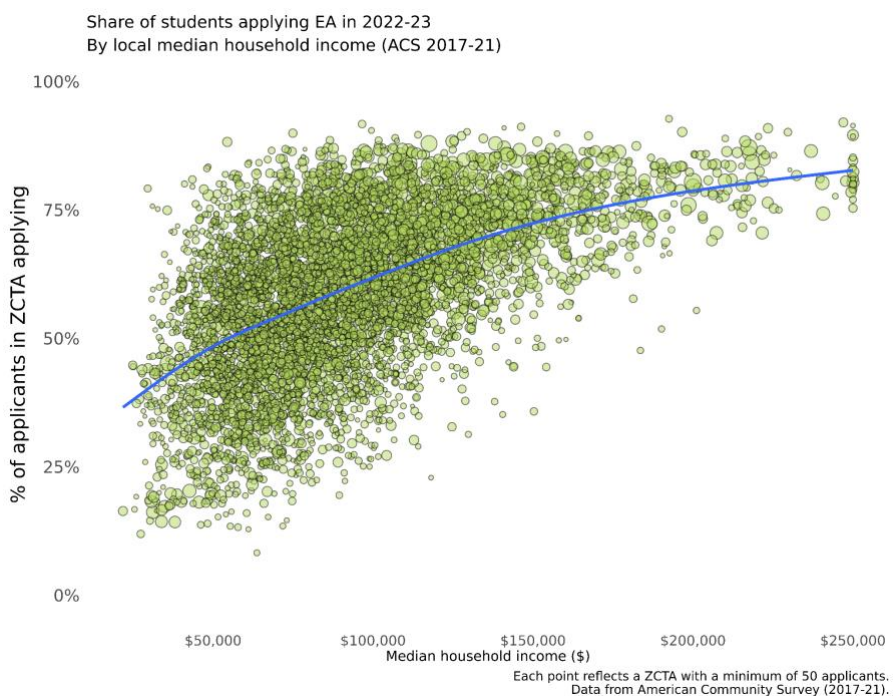
Use of early admission deadlines has increased in recent years. As applicants aim to optimize admissions chances at their target institutions, it is important to understand who is and is not using these deadlines in their application strategies. Our results indicate that trends vary meaningfully across ED and EA deadlines, such that ED applying is substantially less common than EA applying. This is likely the result of the binding language surrounding ED admission plans and the lack of such a commitment when students apply EA. Nonetheless, we find significant differences in both ED and EA applying across demographic subgroups. Our results indicate that these differences are not the result of variation in where students choose to apply or differences in academic characteristics (either GPA or SAT). Instead, we see that applicants are far more likely to apply ED or EA when they live in more advantaged communities (whether this is measured by educational attainment or median household income). We also see that, on average, underrepresented students submitted their first application later in the season than their peers applying to the same institutions. In other words, while early deadlines are increasingly popular overall and may confer admissions advantages for students, we observe that applicants historically underrepresented in higher education are less likely to use them.

## Appendix

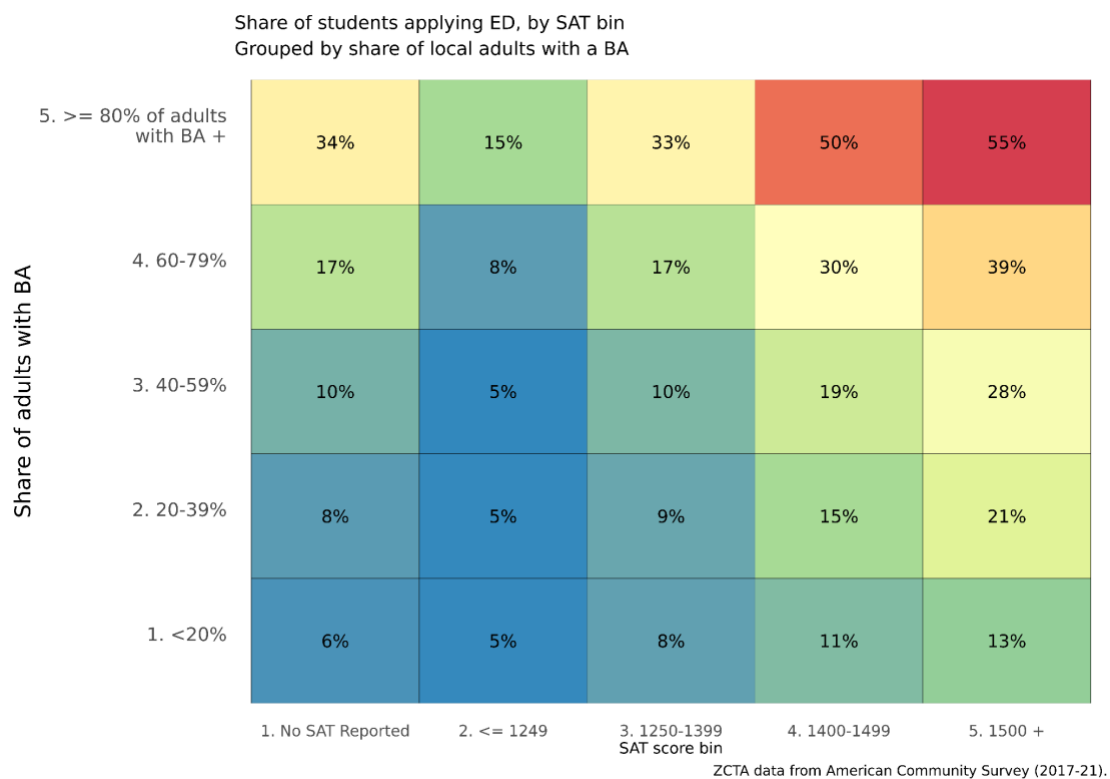
### Appendix Figure A1. Median household income was associated with ED applying



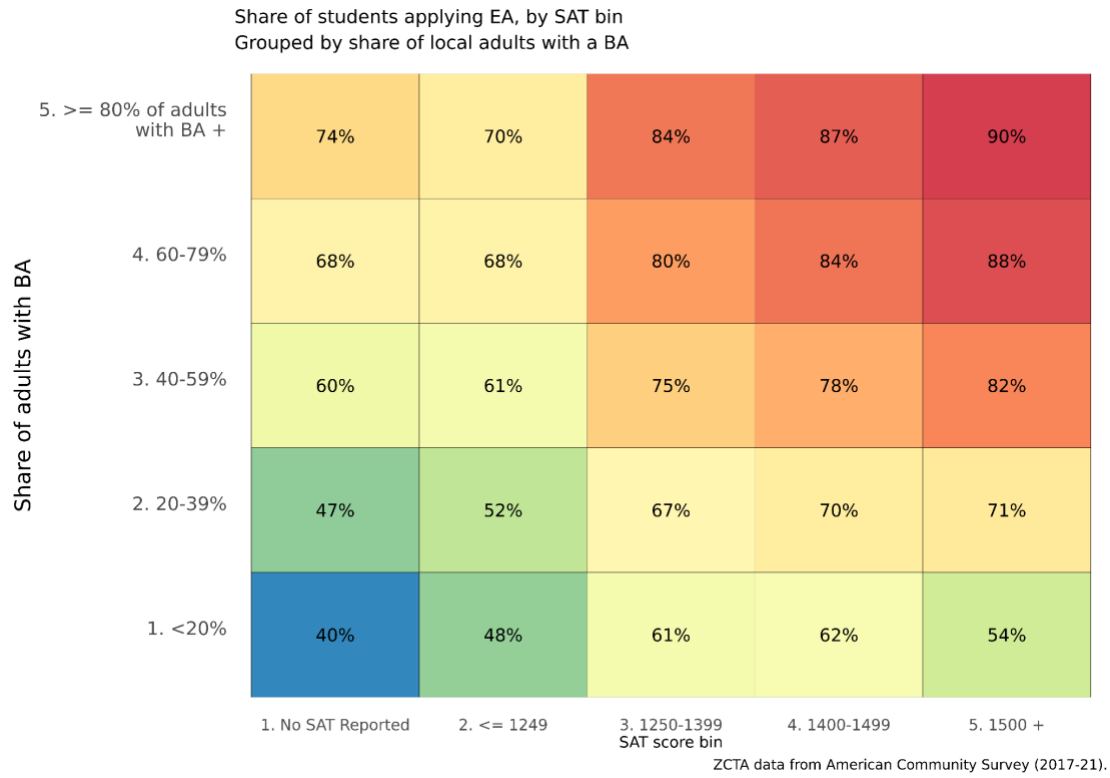
**Appendix Figure A2. Variation in EA applying was smallest across highest-income ZIP codes.**



**Appendix Figure A3. SAT scores alone did not explain differences in ED applying**



**Appendix Figure A4. SAT scores alone did not explain differences in EA applying**



### Appendix Figure A5. Historically underrepresented applicants generally submitted their first application later in the season than their peers.

Timing of first application submission  
(Share of applicants by subgroup)  
Dotted lines indicate November 1 and January 1, respectively

