

Common App for transfer: a four-year retrospective

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Introduction

Transfer application data, unlike first-year application data, has been largely unavailable to the public. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) does not collect information on application behavior among incoming non-first-time students, and the College Scorecard lacks statistics on transfer application behavior. Only the voluntary Common Data Set (CDS)¹ collects institutional data on transfer applications, and the challenge of aggregating these data makes national-level analysis prohibitively difficult. The lack of systematic and timely data on the application process for transfer students has left gaps in our understanding, making it difficult to identify barriers that may exist for these applicants.

Therefore, the Common App data and insights described herein are largely novel. We provide four-year aggregated trends on one of the first nationwide datasets on transfer applications to institutions primarily in the United States. Our analysis reveals that the majority of applicants on the transfer platform were from traditionally well-served populations. These findings are somewhat concerning given that the college transfer process should reflect educational mobility for all students, especially for historically excluded groups.

¹ Institutions summarize application data via the [Common Data Set \(CDS\)](#); however, a central repository for aggregated data does not exist.

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Key findings

1. Over the four seasons from 2018–19 to 2021–22, the data exhibited a U-shaped trend, with over 400,000 account creators in the first year, dropping slightly in 2019–20 and rising again to over 414,000 for the most recent season. In 2021–22, Common App transfer applicants applied to fewer institutions on average (2.25) compared to first-year applicants (6.22), with 112,761 applicants submitting 253,815 applications.
2. Public flagships and large non-profit, private universities emerged as the most popular destination institutions on the platform, with institutions with first-year admit rates below 25% among the most popular recipients of transfer applications.
3. Traditionally well-served students – non-underrepresented minority, high socioeconomic status, continuing-generation, and teenage students – comprised an oversized proportion of Common App transfer applicants. Only one-fourth of applicants were underrepresented minority students (URM), one-third were first-generation, and just 6% came from ZIP codes with a median household income in the bottom quintile.²
4. The data showed that transfer applicants typically attended a single, “High Transfer-High Traditional”³ community college (institutions in which 35.7% or less of awards were in career & technical disciplines were designated as having a high transfer program mix) or four-year university prior to applying. In 2021–22, four out of ten applicants had an academic history of attending an Associate’s College.

² We linked ZIP code-level median household income data from the American Community Survey (5-year estimates, 2017–2021) to each applicant residing in the United States. We then grouped communities (ZIP codes) into five quintiles, where the bottom quintile comprised the 20% of ZIP codes with the lowest median household incomes, and the top quintile represented the 20% of ZIP codes with the highest median household incomes in the United States.

³ Defined using the [Carnegie Classification](#) for Associate’s Colleges.

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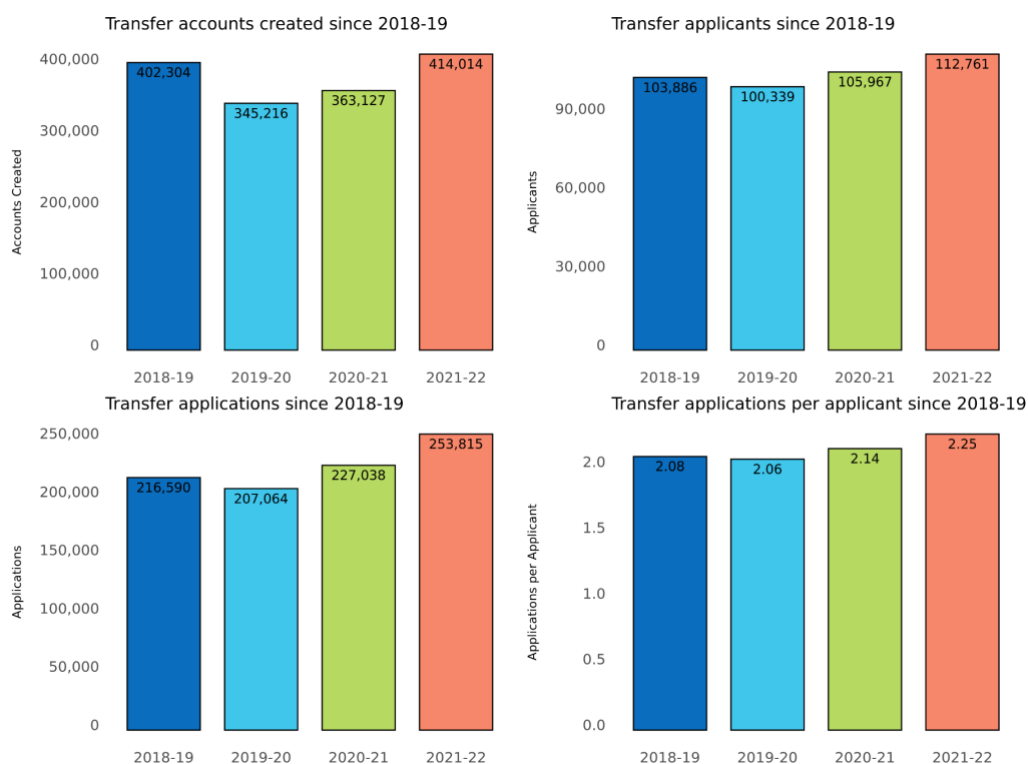
Overall trends

In the 2018–19 academic year, Common App, in collaboration with Liaison International, released the Common App for transfer platform, a new investment in the transfer space and underscoring Common App's leadership in the global college access movement. The data provided here is unprecedented – there is no other organization that facilitates and publicizes information on transfer applications to hundreds of institutions in the United States. While limited in scope, the transfer data available through the Common App serves to uniquely monitor national trends. We hope the availability of aggregate data, previously unavailable at scale, can demystify transfer college application behaviors.

In **Figures 1–4**, the number of Common App account creators, applicants, and submitted applications exhibited a U-shaped curve from the 2018–19 cycle to the 2021–22 cycle. Despite this fluctuation across four seasons, the numbers of applicants and applications remained over 100,000 and 200,000, respectively. Despite a slight increase in members over the past four years, transfer applicants were found to apply to fewer institutions when compared to [first-year applicants](#) (on average, 2.25 versus 6.22 in 2021-22), indicating a more focused and deliberate application strategy.

Figure 1–4. Accounts, applicants, applications, and applications per applicant exhibit a U-shaped curve

Over four years, starting the 2018–19 season through the end of the 2021–22 season

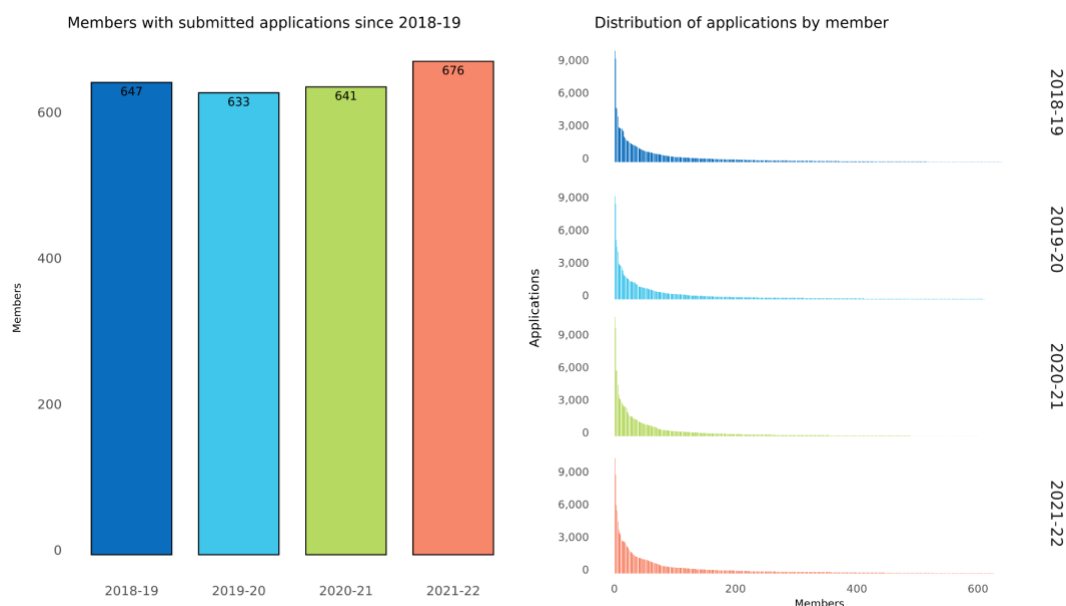


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Figure 5–6. Active members exhibited a U-shaped curve while applications were stable

Over four years, starting the 2018–19 season through the end of the 2021–22 season



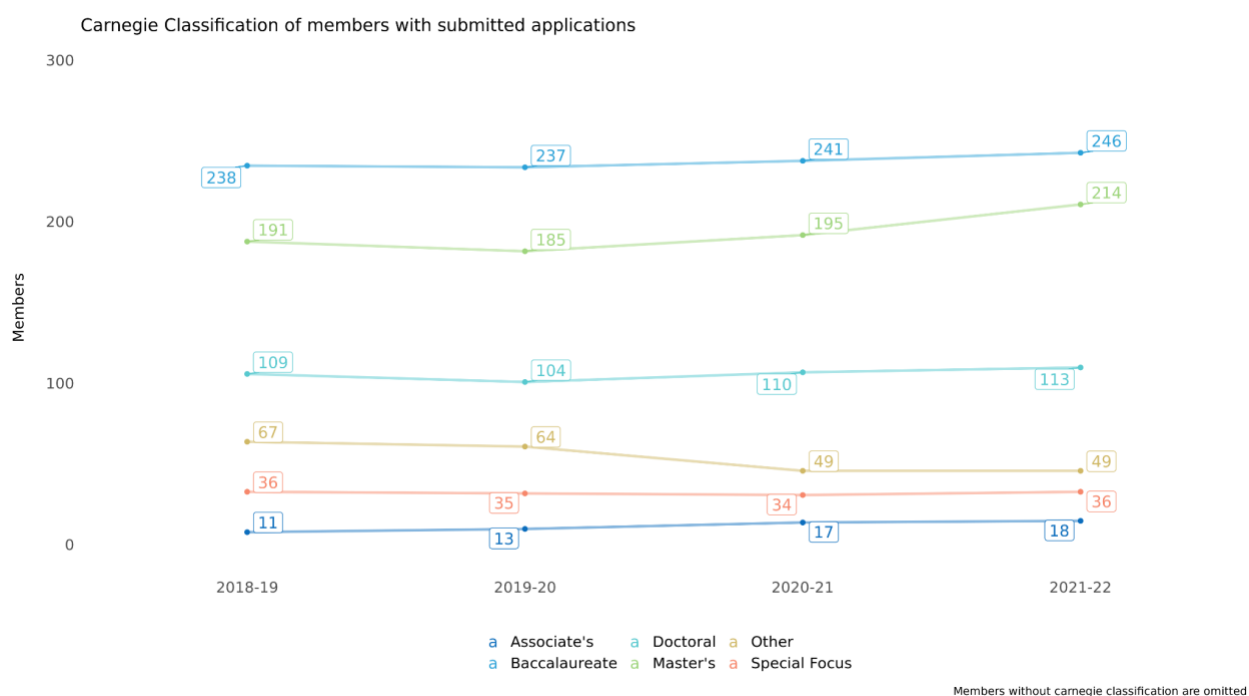
The transfer platform facilitated applications for 676 members in 2021–22 (for comparison, Common App’s first-year platform had 982 members). In other words, nearly 70% of active first-year members also offered transfer admissions through the Common App in the most recent season. Shown in the right chart in **Figures 5–6**, only a few institutions received over 3,000 applications each season, with over 9,000 applications submitted to the top receiving member each year (first bar on the left, **Figure 6**). On the other hand, the typical (or median) member receives a little over one hundred submissions. Similar to our first-year application platform, a small number of institutions attract a disproportionate number of the total Common App user base. For example, 9.4% of transfer applicants submitted an application to the most applied to member in the 2021–22 season.

Members on Common App for transfer

Since its establishment, Common App has [grown in representation](#) and impact from 15 member institutions. As a result of our 40-plus-year history as a leader in the first-year application space, Common App embarked on building a streamlined transfer application portal. Many of our 647 members in our transfer launch year had a Baccalaureate, Master's, and Doctoral Carnegie Classification. Representation of the membership by Carnegie class was consistent with our first-year platform. Seen below in **Figure 7**, over thirty percent of institutions are Baccalaureate Colleges, making up the largest group of members. Active membership on our transfer platform deviates from first-year trends, in that membership has largely been the same since 2018–19.

Figure 7. Bachelor's and Master's Colleges and Universities are prominent options on the transfer platform

Consistent since the first year of Common App for transfer



The representation of minority-serving Institutions (MSIs) has remained unchanged on the transfer platform through this period. **Figure 8** presents the unique count of members with at least one MSI designation, indicated by the top line in the graph. The other MSI subcategories are populated below. Note that MSI categorization is not mutually exclusive: For example, institutions may hold both Hispanic-Serving and Asian American and Pacific Islander-Serving designations.⁴ Hispanic-Serving institutions consistently constituted the largest group of MSIs

⁴ HSI - Hispanic-Serving Institutions; AANAPII - Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions; HBCU - Historically Black Colleges and Universities; PBI - Predominantly Black Institutions; NANTI - Native American Non-Tribal Institutions; TRIBAL - Tribal Colleges and Universities

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on the transfer platform (46 institutions) and first-year platform (65 institutions). On the other hand, Native American Non-Tribal institutions and Tribal colleges and universities were not a part of the Common App for transfer membership in the most recent 2021–22 application season, compared to three institutions active in the first-year membership. While Common App’s [MSI Program](#) has brought on the highest number of MSIs joining the first-year platform in 2021–2022 (110 in total), many new MSI members did not join the Common App for transfer platform.

Figure 8. HBCUs have increased in membership in the most recent application cycle

The number of active minority-serving institutions has slightly decreased since 2018–19

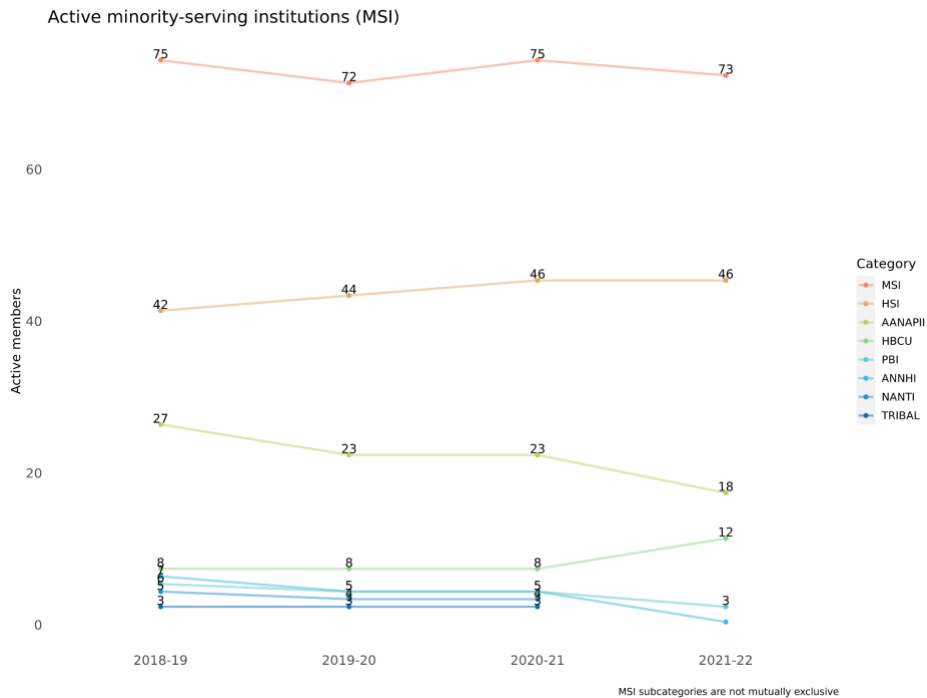
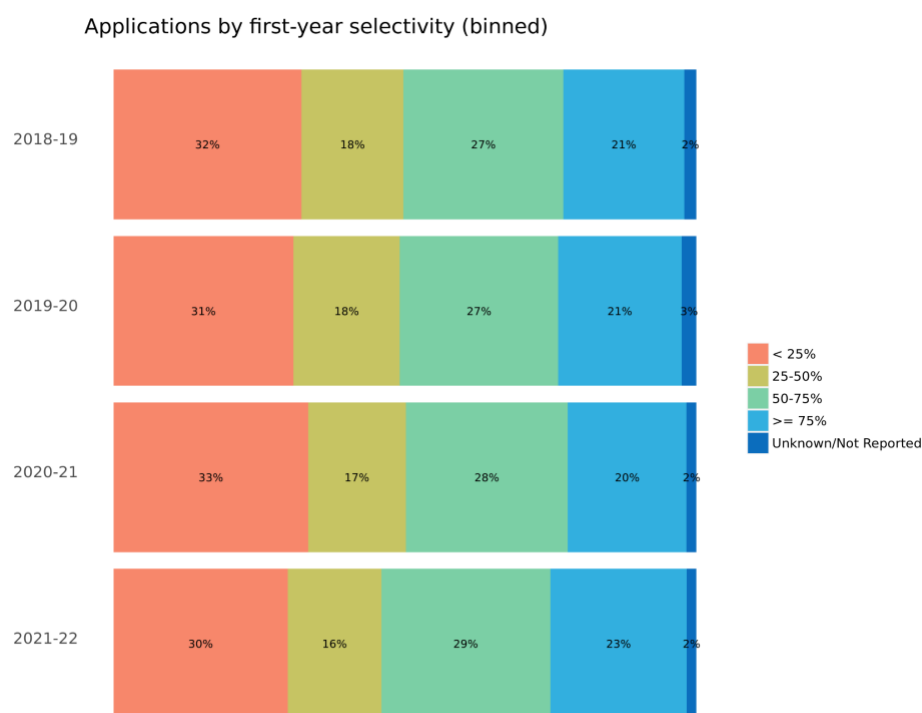


Figure 9. Members with less than 25% first-year admit rates received the most applications

The most selective members consistently receive around one-third of total transfer applications



Above in **Figure 9**, we provide the composition of submitted applications by institutional first-year admit rate. Similar to the application volume seen in the [first-year application data](#), highly-selective⁵ colleges and universities tended to receive the most submissions. For example, members with a first-year admit rate of less than 25% accounted for nearly one-third of Common App's total transfer application volume, the most of any group. Comparatively, members with a first-year admit rate above 75% accounted for less than 30% of total applications. The former group comprised just 7% of the number of member institutions, whereas the latter made up 41%.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most applied-to institutions on the platform consisted of public flagships or selective universities that enroll a large student population. The tendency to apply to large, selective institutions is not a new phenomenon for Common App applicants, transfer or first-year. However, we observe a different application strategy when it comes to transfer students, as indicated by the average number of applications per applicant (shown in **Figure 4**). Unlike the [average first-year applicant](#) that applies to over six colleges and universities ranging in location, size, and selectivity, it appears the average transfer applicant comes to the platform primarily with well-known, large institutions in mind, applying to a little over two institutions.

⁵ We define highly-selective here as institutions with first-time undergraduate admit rates below 50%.

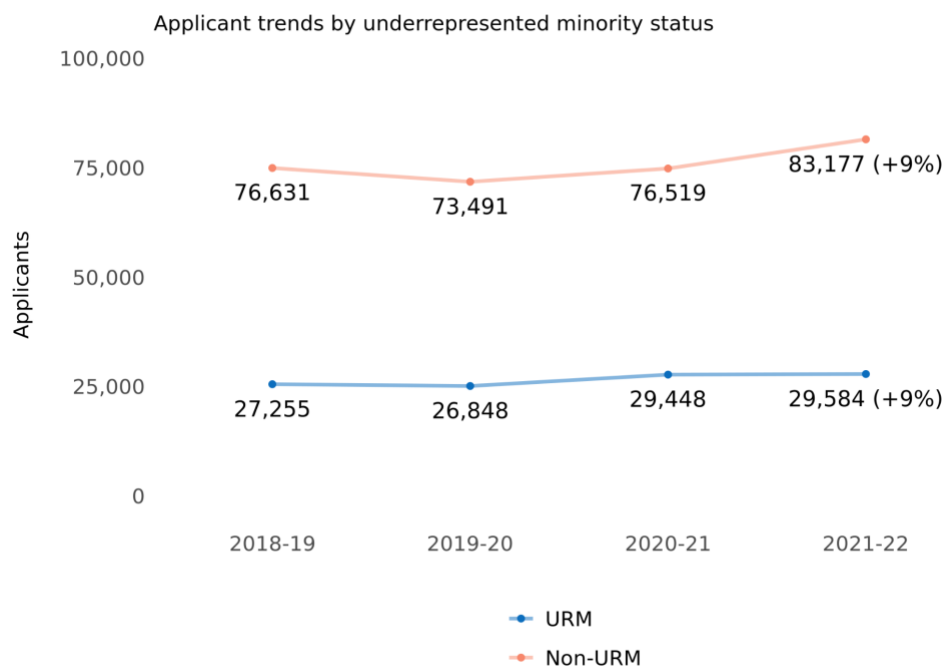
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Who uses the Common App to transfer?

Figure 10. URM applicants made up over one-fourth of the transfer applicant pool

Non-URM applicants have increased by 7K since 2018–19 compared to 2K for URM applicants



The demographic composition of transfer applicants largely mirrored Common App’s first-year applicant pool. Seen in **Figure 10**, underrepresented minority (URM)⁶ applicants comprised around one-fourth of students interested in transferring to member institutions. The racial and ethnic composition of students has been consistent over the past four years, as the four-year rate of growth in URM and non-URM applicants has been the same at +9%. The lack of representation for URM applicants shown here is consistent with URM transfer enrollment figures from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#)⁷.

⁶ 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.

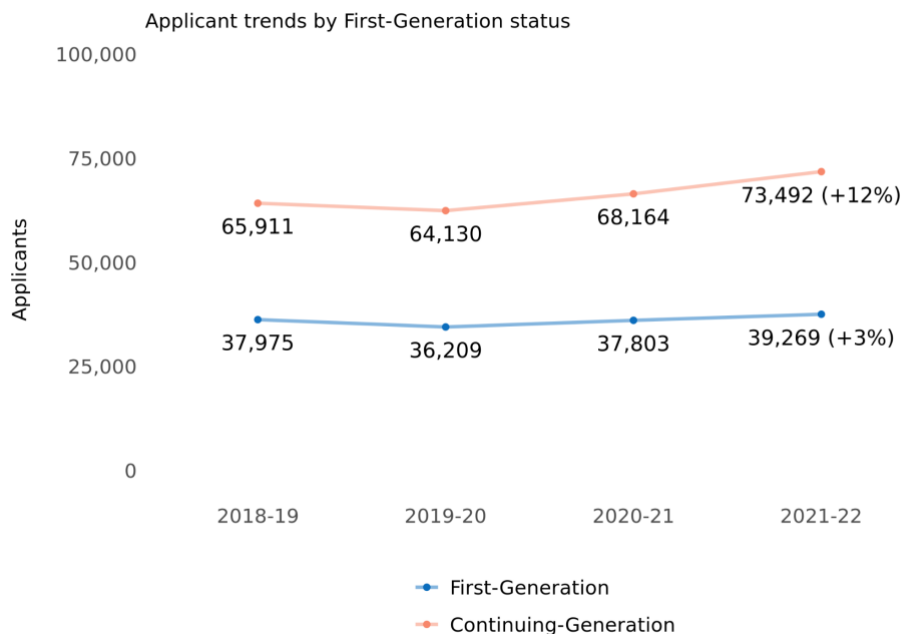
⁷ See National Student Clearinghouse Appendix C, Data Table 4

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Figure 11. First-generation applicants make up over one-third of the transfer applicant pool

The growth of first-generation applicants has stagnated (+3%) since 2018–19

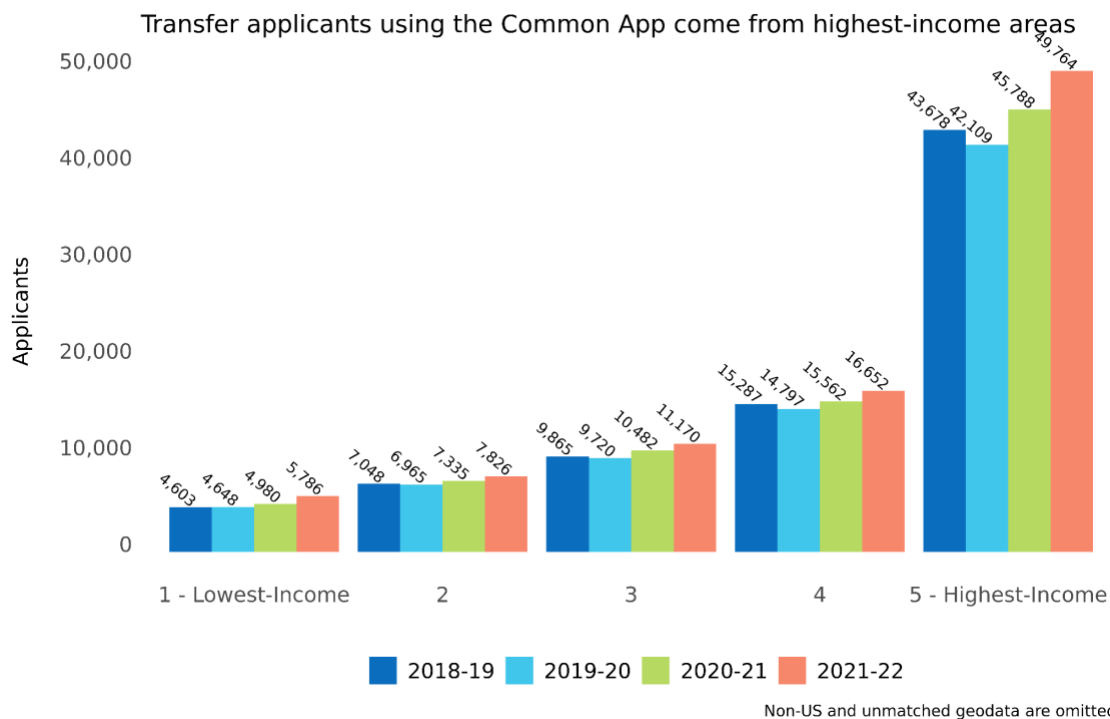


We find the first-generation composition of applicants has kept unchanged (**Figure 11**, above), similar to underrepresented minority trends. First-generation transfer applicants⁸ made up a little over one-third of the applicant pool. Comparatively, one-third of the first-year applicant pool was categorized as first-generation. Out of the four application cycles, we observed the lowest representation of first-generation applicants in the 2021–22 season at 34%. Although the Common App for transfer platform experienced growth in applicants from 2019–20 to 2021–22, the upward trend has been driven primarily by continuing-generation (+12%) and non-URM students.

⁸ First-generation status on the transfer platform is identified by asking students: “Did either of your parents receive a bachelor’s degree or higher?” First-generation on the first-year platform is derived from parents’ reported prior education credentials.

Figure 12. The socioeconomic diversity of applicants' neighborhoods has remained stable

Over half of all applicants reside in neighborhoods with the highest median household incomes



Consistent with prior Common App research, we link ZIP code-level median household income data from the American Community Survey (5-year estimates, 2017–2021) to each applicant residing in the United States. We find significant overrepresentation of applicants from the wealthiest neighborhoods. The majority (around 55%) of applicants, above in **Figure 12**, are shown to have come from the ZIP codes in the top quintile of median household income (20%). On the other hand, only 6% of applicants come from the bottom quintile. The lack of low-income applicants in Common App’s transfer applicant pool is nearly identical to our first-year applicant pool – on the first-year platform 56% of applicants came from ZIP codes in the top income quintile, and just 6% of the applicant pool came from ZIP codes in the bottom quintile.

Figure 13, below, reflects the geographic distribution of overall applicant counts in 2021–22, while the labels reflect the percentage change in applicant counts since 2020–21. The darker blue shades of New York and California indicate a larger applicant pool in those states. It appears our most popular institutions draw the most applicants located in the same state. Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas (shaded in dark green) round out other states well-represented in the Common App transfer membership. Alarming, South Dakota, Iowa, and Montana experienced the sharpest year-over-year applicant percentage declines at 70%, 30%, and 20%, respectively.

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Figure 13. Applicants largely resided in states where the most popular institutions are located

Common App drew many students from New York, California, Texas, and Virginia

Applicants by state
Year-over-year (2020-21 to 2021-22)

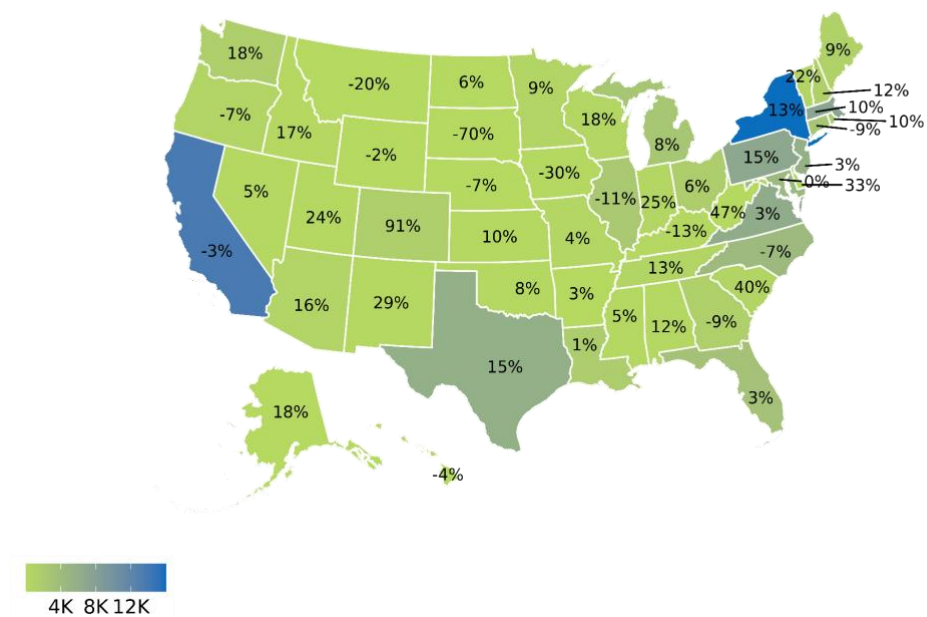
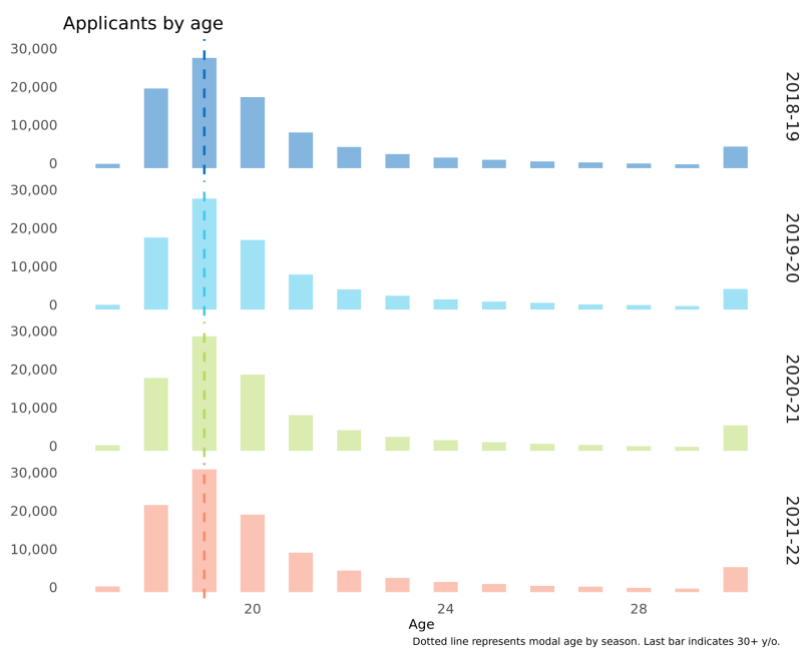


Figure 14. Applicants reported an age that indicated two to three years post-high school

Students between the age of 18 to 22 made up the majority of applicants



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Keeping with earlier trends, we find little to no change in our applicant pool by age over the four-year period. **Figure 14** breaks out applicants by age at the start of each application season. The modal age for the past four years was 19 years old, indicated by the dotted line. The average applicant is a little over 21 years old with an age distribution skewed right, with some applicants exceeding 30 years of age. Through our applicant-specific analyses, we have identified that the Common App for transfer user base primarily consists of non-URM, continuing-generation students that reside in high-income neighborhoods, and are a few years older than the typical high school graduate.

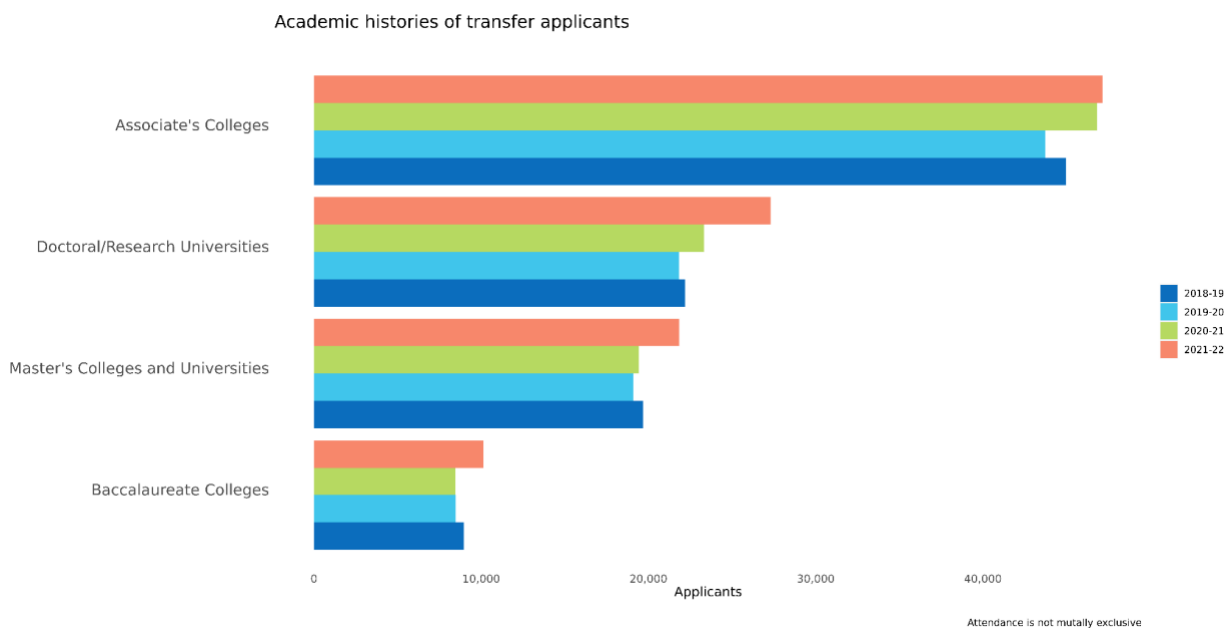
Popular transfer pathways on the Common App

Seen below in **Figure 15**, around 40% of applicants consistently reported an academic history of attending an Associate’s College. More specifically, the “High Transfer” Carnegie Classification (institutions in which 35.7% or less of associate’s degrees were in career & technical disciplines) comprised a large subgroup of prior/sending two-year institutions.

Doctoral/Research Universities and Master’s Colleges (four-year institutions) rounded out the remaining popular starting institutions for Common App’s transfer applicants. Applicants also tended to report only one prior transcript – indicating single institution attendance – before applying to transfer⁹, reinforcing the notion that the Common App transfer platform appealed to students who are twenty-two or younger. Since 2018–19, like many other Common App for transfer trends, the academic histories of applicants have not varied.

Figure 15. Students attended a range of institutions by Carnegie Classification before applying

Over 40% of applicants attended an Associate’s College before applying through Common App



⁹ See Appendix Chart A1.

Conclusion

In 2018–19, Common App released the Common App for transfer platform to facilitate non-first-time applications, enabling one of the only unit-record collections of a nationwide dataset on the transfer application process. Our analysis of the four years of data reveals that the majority of applicants on the Common App transfer platform were from overrepresented populations in higher education, including those who identified as a non-underrepresented minority, had high socioeconomic status, and were continuing-generation students. Our findings suggest that the transfer application process reflects the inequitable state of higher education.

In the four years of Common App for transfer, the composition of members on the platform has remained largely unchanged, leaving much potential for diversification through the [recruitment of new members](#). Moving forward, we will continue to analyze the data from our national membership to track trends in our membership and the application behavior of non-first-time students. As part of our next chapter, Common App is looking to go beyond the application to empower more students to access, afford, and attain postsecondary opportunities. A significant focus of this work will be closing our equity gap in students using the Common App, targeting growth in applicants from communities below the national median household income.

Appendix

Appendix Chart A1. Distribution of transcripts submitted per applicant by season

Applicants typically submitted one transcript when applying through Common App for transfer

