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Chapter 1 College Applications

Each year, US colleges and universities receive hundreds of thousands of applications from first-time domestic students, transfer students, and international students. Results of recent NACAC Admission Trends Surveys indicate that the number of applications has continued to increase across four-year colleges.

Application Volume

Results of the 2018–19 Admission Trends Survey indicate that the average number of applications increased for each group of prospective students between the Fall 2017 and Fall 2018 admission cycles.

Applications from first-time freshmen increased by 6 percent, on average, and applications from international students increased by 7 percent. Transfer applications were up 2 percent overall, but public colleges experienced an

average 1.7 percent decline in transfer applications while private colleges had a 4.7 percent increase.¹ Applications for each group of prospective students also had increased from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017, by 6 percent, 2 percent, and 7 percent, respectively.

According to the Higher Education Research Institute's *The American Freshmen* report series, 36 percent of first-time freshmen applied to seven or more colleges

during the Fall 2017 admission cycle. Since Fall 2014, the percentage of freshmen applying to seven or more colleges has fluctuated between 35 and 36 percent. Since Fall 2013, more than 80 percent of first-time freshmen have applied to at least three colleges each year (see Figure 1).

Increases in application volume have created a growing burden on admission office staff who evaluate prospective students

PERCENT CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS BETWEEN FALL 2017 AND FALL 2018



Transfer
2%



First-time freshmen
6%



International
7%

¹ Independent t-tests indicated there were significant differences in percent change in applicants and control for both international ($t(203) = -1.9, p < .01$); and transfer students ($t(273) = -2.3, p < .05$).

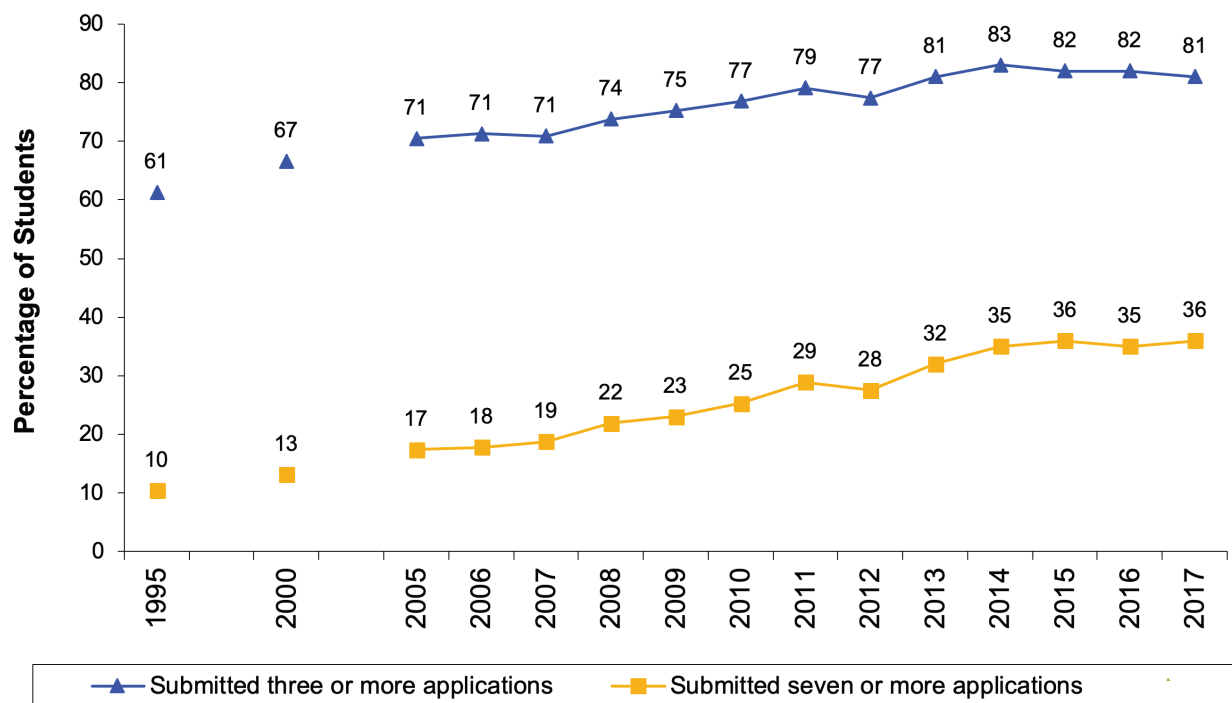
for admission. According to Admission Trends Survey results, the average number of applications for each admission office staff member (excluding administrative staff) for the Fall 2017 admission cycle was 1,035 for public institutions and 461 for private institutions. The number of applications per admission officer grew as applicant selectivity and enrollment size increased (see Table 1).

Acceptance and Yield Rates

The acceptance rate for a college or university is defined as the percentage of applicants who are offered admission. Institutions with lower acceptance rates are considered more highly selective, meaning a smaller number of applicants are admitted. The selectivity of US postsecondary institutions ranges from acceptance

rates of fewer than 10 percent to more than 90 percent of applicants. An institution's yield rate is defined as the percentage of admitted students who ultimately enroll at the institution, after considering other admission offers. Although yield rates may have little relevance to prospective students, accurately predicting yield is critical to colleges looking to avoid either over- or under-enrollment.

FIGURE 1. INCREASES IN FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN APPLICATION SUBMISSION: 1995 TO 2017



SOURCE: Stolzenberg, E.B., Eagan, K., Aragon, M.C., Cesar-Davis, N.M., Jacabo, S., Couch, V., and Rios-Aguilar, C. (2018). *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2017*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

Eagan, K., Stolzenberg, E.B., Zimmerman, H.B., Aragon, M.C., Sayson, H.W., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2017). *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

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TABLE 1. APPLICATIONS PER ADMISSION OFFICER, FALL 2018

| | N | Mean |
|--|-----|-------|
| <i>Control</i> | | |
| Public | 67 | 1,035 |
| Private | 133 | 461 |
| <i>Enrollment</i> | | |
| Fewer than 3,000 students | 105 | 315 |
| 3,000 to 9,999 | 52 | 771 |
| 10,000 or more | 41 | 1,377 |
| <i>Selectivity</i> | | |
| Accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants | 53 | 1,026 |
| 50 to 70 percent | 69 | 605 |
| 71 to 85 percent | 60 | 474 |
| More than 85 percent | 20 | 335 |

NOTE: Both admission counselors and mid/senior level admission officials were included in the analyses.

NOTE: Independent *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs indicated there were significant differences in the application to admission officer ratio by: control ($t(198) = 5.1, p < .001$); enrollment ($F(2, 195) = 35.5, p < .001$), and acceptance rate ($F(3, 198) = 6.5, p < .001$).

Correlation (Pearson) applications per admission officer and: enrollment .578, $p < .01$; acceptance rate -.326, $p < .01$. Correlation (Spearman's rho) applications per admission officer and public control .456, $p < .01$.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018–19.

TABLE 2. APPLICATIONS AND ENROLLMENT, BY SELECTIVITY: FALL 2017

| Selectivity | National share of institutions | Average number of applications per institution | National share of applications | National share of full-time, first-time degree seeking undergraduates |
|--|--------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants | 19.2% | 12,492 | 36.5% | 21.3% |
| 50 to 70 percent | 33.4 | 6,108 | 31.0 | 32.3 |
| 71 to 85 percent | 28.8 | 5,625 | 24.6 | 33.4 |
| More than 85 percent | 18.6 | 2,771 | 7.9 | 13.0 |

$N = 1,599$

SOURCE: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017–18). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES. [Includes Title-IV participating, four-year public and private not-for-profit, degree-granting (primarily baccalaureate) institutions in the US that enroll first-time freshman and are not open admission.]

First-Time Freshmen

According to data collected by the US Department of Education, the national average acceptance rate for first-time freshmen across all four-year institutions in the US was 66.7 percent in Fall 2017, up from a low of 63.9 percent in Fall 2012. The average acceptance rate at private institutions was about 6 percentage points lower than the average rate at public institutions (64.9 percent versus 70.3 percent).

The most selective four-year colleges—defined as those accepting less than half of all applicants—received 37 percent of all Fall 2016 applications but enrolled only 21 percent of first-time undergraduate students. Nearly two-thirds of first-time, full-time freshmen (65 percent) were enrolled in institutions with selectivity rates

between 50 percent and 85 percent (see Table 2).

For the Fall 2017 freshman class, the average yield rate among four-year colleges and universities was 33.7 percent, nearly identical to the Fall 2016 rate of 33.6 percent. Over the past decade the average yield rate has steadily declined from 48 percent in Fall 2007.

Transfer and International Students

Among 2018–19 Admission Trends Survey respondents that accept transfer students, the average acceptance rate for transfer applicants was slightly lower than for the first-time freshmen population (61 percent compared to 66 percent). However, the yield for accepted transfer students was much higher (52 percent compared to 27 percent).

A similar analysis of institutions that accept international students showed that first-time international students are accepted at a lower rate (52 percent) than both transfer students and first-time freshmen. The yield rate for international students was 29 percent, indicating they were only slightly more likely to enroll than accepted first-time freshmen applicants (see Table 3).

Application Fees

Results of the Admission Trends Survey indicate that 71 percent of four-year, not-for-profit colleges had an application fee for the Fall 2018 admission cycle, which averaged \$50. Public colleges were more likely to report having an application fee than privates (91 percent versus 57 percent), but no difference was found in the average fee amount.² Larger enrollment sizes and lower acceptance rates were associated with higher average fees.³

TABLE 3. KEY STATISTICS FOR TRANSFER AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ADMISSION: FALL 2018

| Transfer | N | Mean |
|--|----------|-------------|
| Transfer Selectivity Rate | 310 | 60.6% |
| Overall Freshman Selectivity Rate for Institutions with Transfer Students | 314 | 65.5% |
| Transfer Yield Rate | 310 | 52.1% |
| Overall Yield Rate for Institutions with Transfer Students | 314 | 26.6% |
| International | N | Mean |
| International Selectivity Rate | 227 | 51.7% |
| Overall Freshman Selectivity Rate for Institutions with International Students | 307 | 65.6% |
| International Yield Rate | 230 | 28.5% |
| Overall Yield Rate for Institutions with International Students | 307 | 26.7% |

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018–19.

² Chi-squared test control and application fee ($X^2(1) = 41.0$ $p < .001$; $\phi = .363$ $p < .001$).

³ Pearson correlations for application fee amount and: enrollment (.295), acceptance rate (-.498), $p < .01$.