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COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

Each year, US colleges and universities receive hundreds of thousands of applications from first-time domestic students, transfer students, and students from abroad. Results of recent NACAC Admission Trends Surveys¹ indicate that the number of applications is on an upward trajectory at most four-year colleges. Increased application volume is driven in part by steady growth in the number of college applications submitted by each prospective student. While this trend has resulted in more enrollment options for many students, it has also led to declining average yield rates for colleges. More significantly, increased application volume across the four-year college sector complicates the crucial task of predicting yield rates and admitting enough students who will ultimately decide to attend

the institution. To some extent, this pattern has created a false impression that it has become increasingly difficult for students to be admitted to college.

Application Volume

Results of the 2015 Admission Trends Survey indicate that the average number of applications increased for each group of prospective students between the Fall 2014 and Fall 2015 admission

cycles. Applications from first-time freshmen increased by 6 percent, on average, and applications from prospective transfer students increased by 4 percent. Although applications from international students represented the smallest proportion of all applications received, they increased by 23 percent from Fall 2014 to Fall 2015.

According to the Higher Education Research Institute's

PERCENT CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS BETWEEN FALL 2014 AND FALL 2015



Transfer
4.3%



First-time Freshmen
6.2%



International
22.9%

¹ Because not all questions on the Admission Trends Survey are asked yearly, this chapter draws on statistics from the Fall 2013–2015 administrations of the survey.

The *American Freshmen* report series, the proportion of enrolled first-time freshmen who had applied to seven or more colleges reached 36 percent in Fall 2015, up from 17 percent in 2005 and only 9 percent in 1990. More than 80 percent of first-time freshmen had applied to at least three colleges (see Figure 1).

Online applications, which have become nearly ubiquitous over the past decade, likely also contributed to increases in application volume. For the Fall 2013 admission cycle,

four-year colleges and universities received an average of 94 percent of applications online, up from 68 percent in Fall 2007 and only 49 percent in Fall 2005.

Application volume increases have created a growing burden on admission office staff who evaluate prospective students for admission. According to 2015 Admission Trends Survey results, the average number of freshman applications for each admission office staff member (excluding administrative staff) was

914 at public institutions and 411 at private colleges. The number of applications per admission officer increased with both applicant selectivity rates and enrollment size. On average, colleges that enroll at least 10,000 students received four times as many applications per admission officer than those enrolling fewer than 3,000 students (see Table 1).

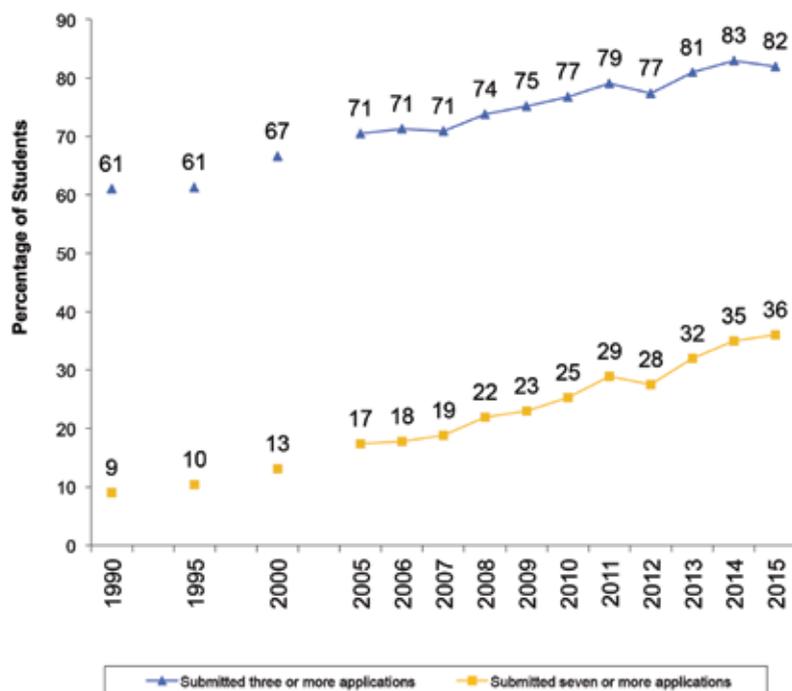
Acceptance and Yield Rates

Selectivity is defined as the proportion of applicants who are offered admission, and is usually expressed as a percentage. Higher selectivity is equated with lower acceptance rates, meaning a smaller number of applicants are admitted. The selectivity rates of US postsecondary institutions range from less 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 in 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.

First-Time Freshmen

According to data collected by the US Department of Education, the average acceptance rate for first-time freshmen across all four-year institutions in the US was nearly two-thirds (65.8 percent) for the Fall 2014 admission cycle. The national average acceptance rate has edged up from 64.7 percent in Fall 2013, after reaching a low of 63.9 percent in Fall 2012—the

FIGURE 1. INCREASES IN FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN APPLICATION SUBMISSION: 1990 TO 2015



SOURCE: Eagan, M. K., Stolzenberg, E.B., Ramirez, J.J., Aragon, M.C., Suchard, M.R., and Rios-Aguilar, C. (2016) *The American Freshman: Fifty-Year Trends, 1996-2015*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

TABLE 1: APPLICATIONS PER ADMISSION OFFICER

	Mean
<i>Control</i>	
Public	914
Private	411
<i>Enrollment</i>	
Fewer than 3,000 students	316
3,000 to 9,999	661
10,000 or more	1,241
<i>Selectivity</i>	
Accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants	923
50 to 70 percent	593
71 to 85 percent	480
More than 85 percent	327

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 ($t(158) = 6.3, p < .001$); enrollment ($F(2,157) = 60.1, p < .001$), and selectivity ($F(3,156) = 6.3, p < .001$).

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2015.

year in which the total number of high school graduates reached a peak. For Fall 2014, the average acceptance rate at private institutions was about 4 percentage

points lower than the average rate at public institutions.

The most selective four-year colleges—defined as those accepting less than half of all

applicants—received 35 percent of all Fall 2014 applications, but enrolled only 20 percent of all first-time undergraduate students. Most students (70 percent) were enrolled in institutions with selectivity rates between 50 percent and 85 percent (see Table 2).

For the Fall 2014 freshman class, the average yield rate among four-year colleges and universities was 36.2 percent. The average yield rate increased slightly from Fall 2013 (35.7 percent) after a steady decline from 48.7 percent in Fall 2002.

Transfer and International Students

Among 2015 Admission Trends Survey respondents that accept transfer students, the average acceptance rate for transfer applicants was slightly lower than for the first-time freshman population (61 percent, compared to 65 percent). However, the yield for accepted transfer students was much higher (55 percent, compared to 29 percent).

A similar analysis of institutions that accept international students showed that first-time international students are accepted at a much lower rate (34 percent) than the

THE AVERAGE ACCEPTANCE RATE FOR FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN

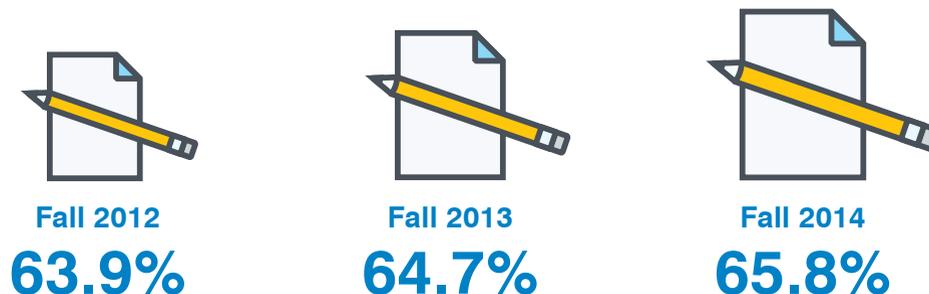


TABLE 2: APPLICATIONS AND ENROLLMENT, BY SELECTIVITY

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	19.7%	10,678	35.2%	19.8%
50 to 70 percent	36.0	5,860	35.3	36.8
71 to 85 percent	28.9	4,969	24.0	32.4
More than 85 percent	15.4	2,129	5.5	11.0

NOTE: Of the 1,871 total institutions, 1,557 provided selectivity data for Fall 2014.

NOTE: Independent *t* and Mann-Whitney *U* Tests, respectively, show there is a significant difference in selectivity ($t(1553) = 3.4, p < .001$) and yield ($U = 211093, p < .001$) by control.

SOURCE: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2014–15). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES.

overall freshman acceptance rate of 65 percent. However, international students who are accepted are much more likely to enroll than accepted first-time freshmen applicants (52 percent, compared to 29 percent) (see Table 3).

Application Fees

According to US Department of Education data², 83 percent of four-year, not-for-profit colleges had an application fee in 2014, which averaged \$44. Public colleges were more likely to report having application fees than privates (94 percent versus 78 percent).

Larger enrollment sizes and lower selectivity rates were associated with higher average fees. For example, institutions enrolling 10,000 or more students had an average application fee of \$49, and those that accepted fewer than half of all applicants charged an average fee of \$52.³

² US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES.

³ Independent *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs showed there was a significant difference in application fee amount by control ($t(1732) = 4.7, p < .001$), total full-time undergraduate enrollment ($X^2(2) = 198, p < .001$) and undergraduate selectivity ($X^2(3) = 67.5, p < .001$).

TABLE 3: KEY STATISTICS FOR TRANSFER AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ADMISSION

Transfer	N	Mean
Number of Transfer Applications Received	510	1,379
Transfer Selectivity Rate	509	61.0%
Overall Freshman Selectivity Rate for Institutions with Transfer Students	518	65.3%
Transfer Yield Rate	510	54.7%
Overall Yield Rate for Institutions with Transfer Students	518	28.8%
International	N	Mean
Number of International Applications Received	364	863
International Selectivity Rate	358	33.9%
Overall Freshman Selectivity Rate for Institutions with Transfer Students	500	64.9%
International Yield Rate	359	52.0%
Overall Yield Rate for Institutions with International Students	500	28.9%

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2015.