Application trends following the end of race-conscious admissions

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Introduction

On June 29, 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled against the use of race-conscious admissions practices in the cases of *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina*.

These decisions effectively banned the consideration of student race as a factor in admissions decisions nationwide, except in the much narrower consideration of how race "affected the applicant's life…tied to a quality of character or unique ability that the particular applicant can contribute to the university."

While many of the ramifications of these court decisions are still to be seen, we are now nearing the end of the first full application season following this landmark decision. Using the Common App's extensive data warehouse, we are uniquely positioned to explore whether students' application behaviors may have responded to these highly publicized court cases on a national level

More specifically, we use national application data from nearly six million domestic applicants over the past five years to examine:

1. Do we observe any meaningful changes to how students self-report their race/ethnicity on our platform?

2. To what extent did the application behaviors of underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (URM)[1] students change in the 2023–2024 season compared to prior seasons? I.e., did the end of race-conscious admissions correspond with a notable decrease to URM students' college aspirations?

3. To what extent did the application behaviors of non-URM students change in the 2023–2024 season compared to prior seasons? I.e., did the end of race-conscious admissions correspond with a notable increase to non-URM students' college aspirations?

4. As race-conscious admissions practices were most common amongst the most selective institutions (admit rates below 25%), to what extent did the diversity of the application pool of these institutions change in the 2023–2024 season compared to prior seasons?

5. Given the exception the court noted around discussing how race affects a student's life, to what extent did students discuss racial/ethnic identity in their open-response essays differently in the 2023–2024 season compared to prior seasons?

While we cannot speak conclusively to the exact causal effects of the court decisions on any of the above (i.e., all results here are descriptive in nature, with many potential explanations besides the court decisions to consider), the trends we reveal here provide important data insights into the new landscape that applicants and institutions are navigating in the wake of these historic cases.

We hope these data-driven insights provide the public, our stakeholders, and policy leaders with valuable context and evidence to inform discussion about how we as a sector move forward from here.

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[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, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander are classified as URM applicants.

Contents

Key findings

1. We do not observe any meaningful deviations from historical trends with respect to how students self-identify their racial/ethnic identity on our platform.

2. We also do not observe any meaningful deviations from historical trends with respect to students' college application behaviors across racial/ethnic groups (whether grouped by broad URM status, or grouped by specific race/ethnicity categories) on our platform. This is true whether we examine aspirations by number of applications sent per applicant, the percent of students applying to most selective institutions (admit rates less than 25%), the number of applications students sent to the most selective institutions, or the average admit rate of institutions students applied to.

3. When examining the average diversity of Common App members' applicant pools, we generally do not see any major changes or differences from pre-existing trends in the 2023–24 season. If anything, the most selective members on our platform may be seeing a very slightly lower proportion of Asian students in their high-achieving applicant pools this season; we caution that this interpretation is difficult to substantiate given its small magnitude relative to the inherent noisiness of our season-by-season data.

4. Finally, we do not see substantial differences in the rates at which students, overall, are choosing to write about their racial/ethnic identity in their Personal Essays this season. The only exception we note is that the subset of higher-achieving URM applicants may be discussing their racial/ethnic identity slightly more often than comparable non-URM students this season.

Study sample and analytic framework

To rigorously examine the dynamics we describe in the introduction, we first need to clearly define the sample of students and institutions we'll focus on in this study.

- We focus on application data from the **2019–20 season through this present season (2023–24)**.
- To keep the data comparable across seasons, we only include **applications submitted by April 30th** of each season to match when the data for this report were collected and analyzed for the present season.
    - Note: For the 2022–23 season, more than 99% of all applications throughout the season had been submitted by April 30th. In other words, this restriction is not expected to have any meaningful impact on the results we report here.
- Because student race/ethnicity is a complicated construct that varies substantially across country contexts, we also **focus exclusively on domestic applicants in our study** (i.e., we exclude applicants who report sole citizenship in a non-U.S. country, and we include all other applicants, inclusive of U.S. permanent residents and other U.S. immigrant statuses).
- Because the Common App membership has grown throughout this period, we **focus on applicants and applications to institutions that have been consistent Common App members since the 2019–20 season** (herein referred to as "returning members"). This mirrors the restriction we use in our Deadline Update series.
    - Note: 95.3% of domestic applicants in the 2023–2024 season had submitted an application to at least one such returning member.
- Because the court cases of interest apply only to U.S.-based institutions, we will further **focus on domestic institutions** among our returning membership.
    - Note: 94% of returning members were based in the U.S.
- Finally, because race-conscious admissions practices were most prevalent among more selective institutions, **we often subset our analysis to the returning member institutions with reported admit rates below 25%** (herein referred to as "most selective institutions") per publicly available IPEDS data (2021–2022 data year).
    - Note: For reference, 92% of all Bachelor's-, Master's-, and Doctorate-awarding four-year institutions (per Carnegie Classifications) in IPEDS with 2021–22 admit rates below 25% are returning members on Common App.
    - Note: 98% of all Common App members with admit rates below 25% are returning members on Common App.

To assess the potential impacts of the Supreme Court decisions on application behavior, we will be focusing particularly on whether application trends this season break meaningfully from trends from earlier seasons. That being said, the Supreme Court decisions are far from the *only* change to the application landscape since last year that could explain any breaks

from trends that we observe. Because of this, all relationships we show here are necessarily **correlational** and **suggestive**, and should be taken with commensurate caution in interpretation (especially when attempting to attribute anything specifically to the decisions).

Trends in student racial/ethnic identity self-reporting

We'll begin by examining applicants' overall racial/ethnic identity reporting on our platform over time. Did we see any major changes in the composition of the overall pool in terms of race/ethnicity this season versus prior seasons? Figure 1 displays the overall volume of applicants for each URM group, for each season since 2019–20. The label on the final point in each line displays the number of applicants in the 2023–24 season for that group, and we display the percent growth since the 2022–23 season in parentheses.

Figure 1. Applicant volume for each URM group since 2019–20
Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
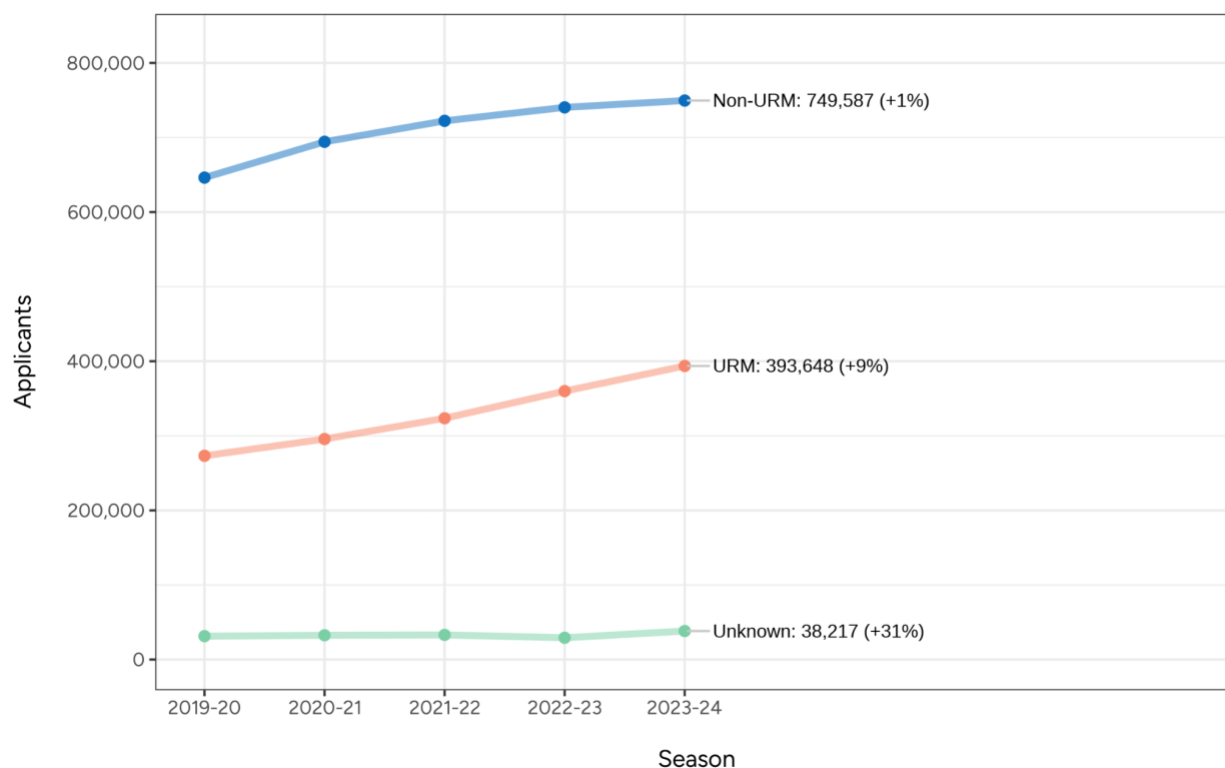
Looking at the trends over time, there is very little to remark on for the 2023–24 season for either URM or non-URM applicant groups. The trajectories of each group in terms of applicant volume looks generally like a straight line between at least 2021–22 and 2023–24. Note that the percent growth on the "Unknown" group (students who did not respond to the race/ethnicity question) is relatively large between 2022–23 and 2023–24, but appears

to mostly be due to an anomalous dip in the size of this group during the 2022–23 season that we've remarked on in our [Deadline Updates](#) series throughout this season.

That being said, do things look different if we break each group down into their constituent race/ethnicity groupings instead? Figure 2 displays parallel data to Figure 1, but instead disaggregating URM and non-URM groups.

Figure 2. Applicant volume by broad race/ethnicity groups since 2019–20
Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
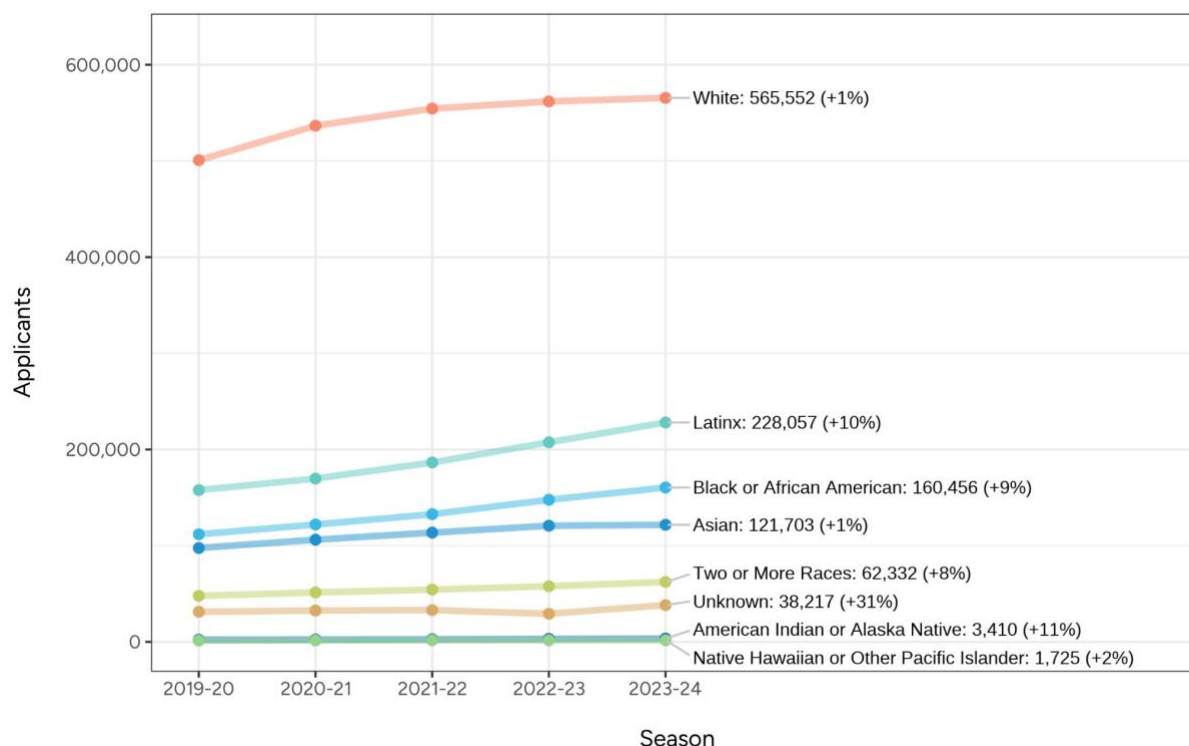
Similar to Figure 1, there doesn't seem to be any major deviation occurring in the 2023–24 season for any of the groups. There may be a slight "flattening" of applicant volume for students identifying as Asian, but it is *very* slight and difficult to read into given its small magnitude. In other words, we find no meaningful evidence to point to the idea that students overall are changing their racial/ethnic identity on our platform in relation to the Supreme Court decisions.

While we do not display this in the present report, note that this plot looks identical in nature if we instead look at all domestic, senior account creators rather than just applicants (i.e., including students who did not necessarily complete an application) as well.

Trends in application behaviors across racial/ethnic groups

While we don't see changes in how students self-identify on our platform, it may still be the case that students are reacting to the Supreme Court decision by changing their college

application behaviors. In Figure 3, we first explore whether students are changing the number of applications they send on average by URM group; if students perceive that they are less likely to get into any one school in light of the Supreme Court decision, they may respond by sending out more applications.

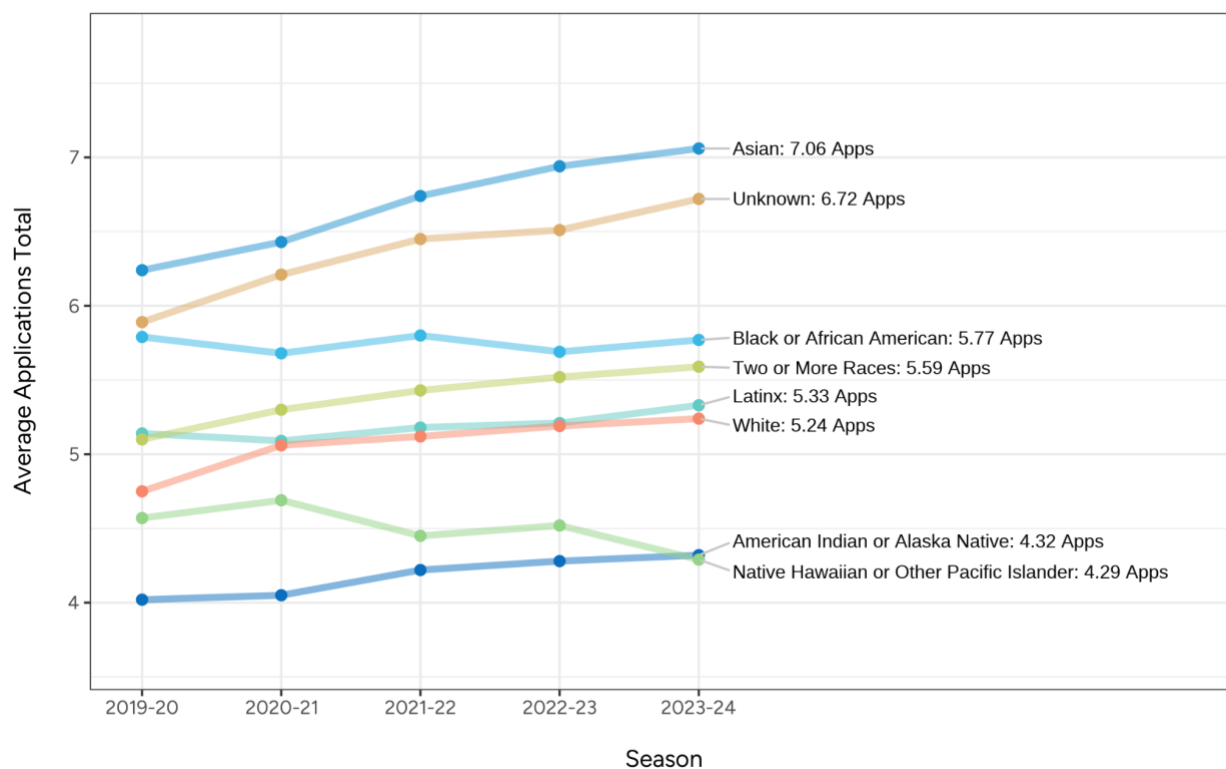**Figure 3. Applications per applicant for each URM group since 2019–20**
Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
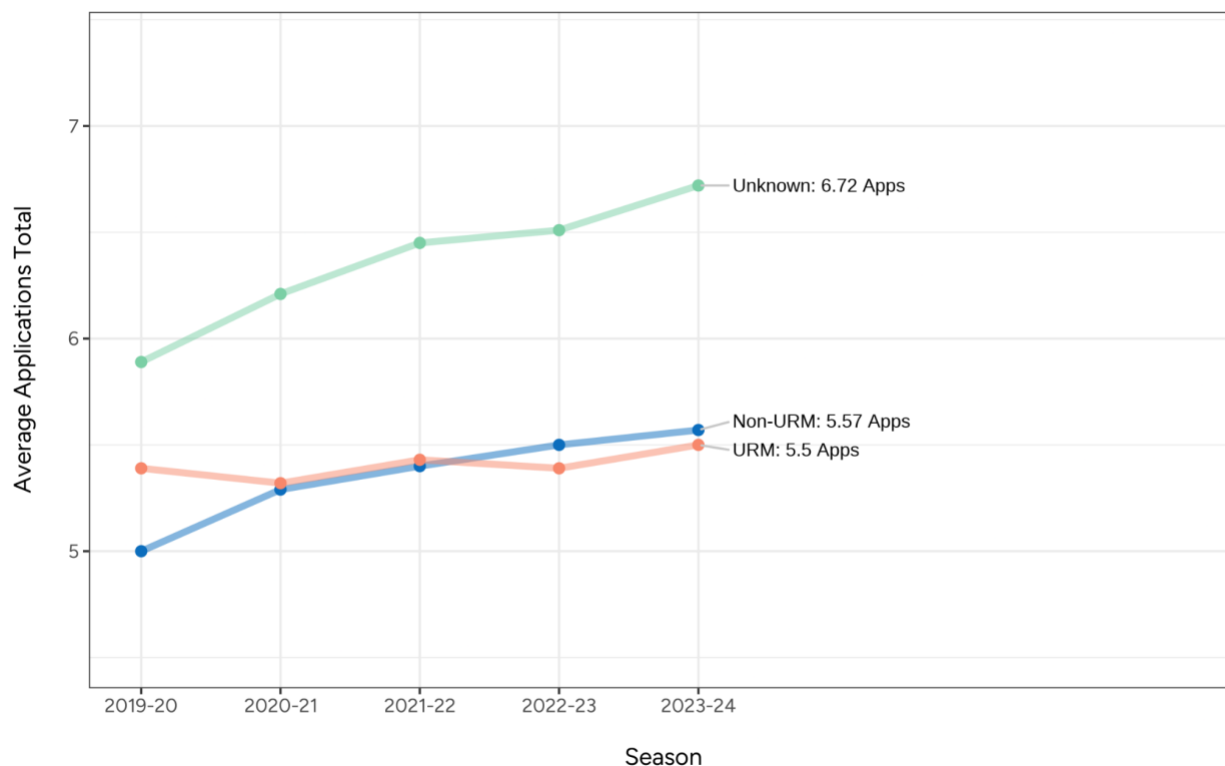
We see a slight dip from trend in the 2022–23 season for both the URM and Unknown groups, but otherwise, it would be difficult to identify a meaningful break-from-trend in the 2023–24 season that is the focus of this analysis. Note that we have previously identified highly competitive application behaviors from the Unknown group in [prior research on the subject](#), mirroring their high applications-per-applicant numbers above.

Does this plot look different if we disaggregate URM groupings into their constituent race/ethnicities in Figure 4? Generally speaking, no. While there is a variable pattern to the trendlines for Black or African American and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander groups, we don't see any meaningful deviation from prior trends in the 2023–24 season specifically.

Figure 4. Applications per applicant for each race/ethnicity group since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30

While students' overall applications-per-applicant may not have changed in 2023–24, could it be that students are specifically becoming less likely to apply to the most selective institutions (admit rates less than 25%)? Figure 5 charts the percent of students in each URM group that applied to at least one most selective institution.

Figure 5. Percent of students in each URM grouping applying to at least one most selective institution since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
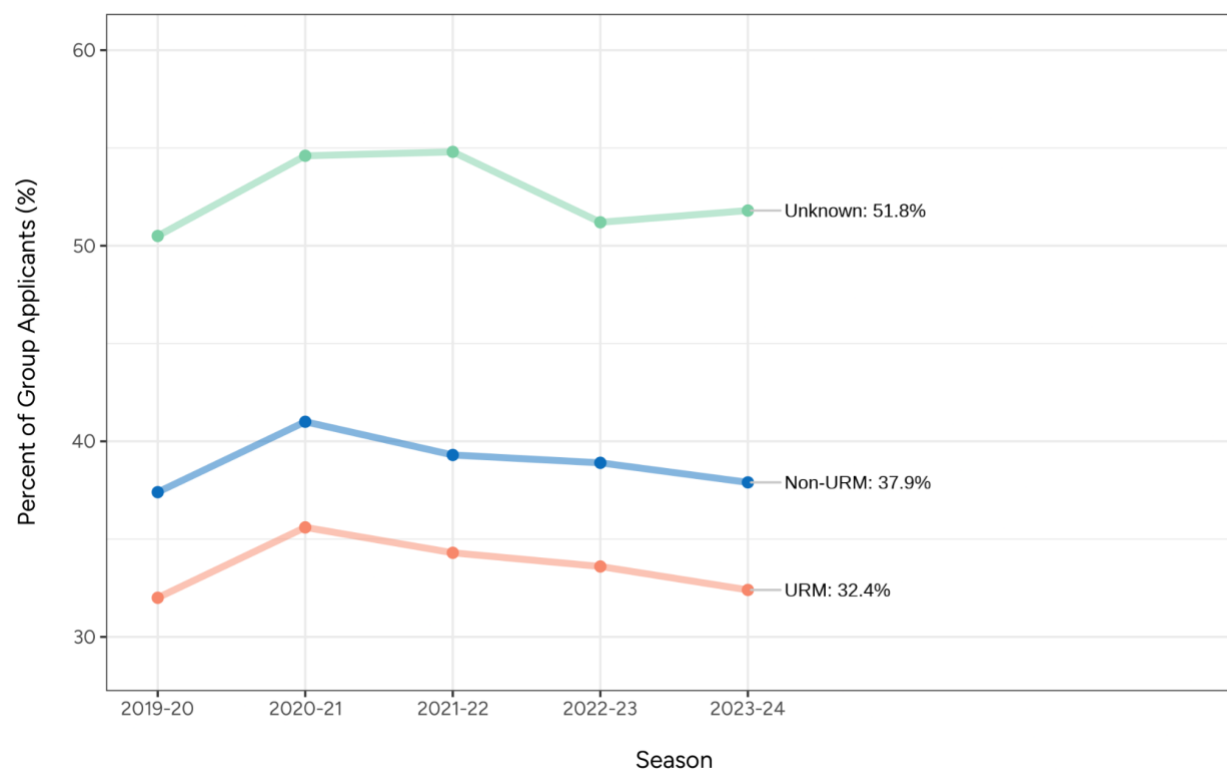
Trajectories for the URM and non-URM groups look to be almost perfectly parallel, indicating no differential behavior shifts in any of the seasons shown. The Unknown group has a less stable trendline, though on balance it seems to "average" to a similar overall trend to the other groups by 2023–24 (i.e., the faster rise on 2021–22 is counteracted by a bigger dip in 2022–23, and only partially compensated for in 2023–24).

When we plot this same outcome by standard race/ethnicity groups within each URM grouping in Figure 6, the story remains the same: there do not appear to be any anomalous changes in the 2023–24 season specifically.

Note that while we don't display the results in the present report, these plots look identical in nature when instead counting the average number of applications sent to most selective institutions (i.e., using a count of applications to these most selective institutions instead of a binary flag for at least one such application). We also do not see any meaningful differences if we instead count the average admit rate of all institutions students applied to (a common metric for competitive application portfolios used in the education research literature).

Figure 6. Percent of students in each race/ethnicity group applying to at least one most selective institution since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
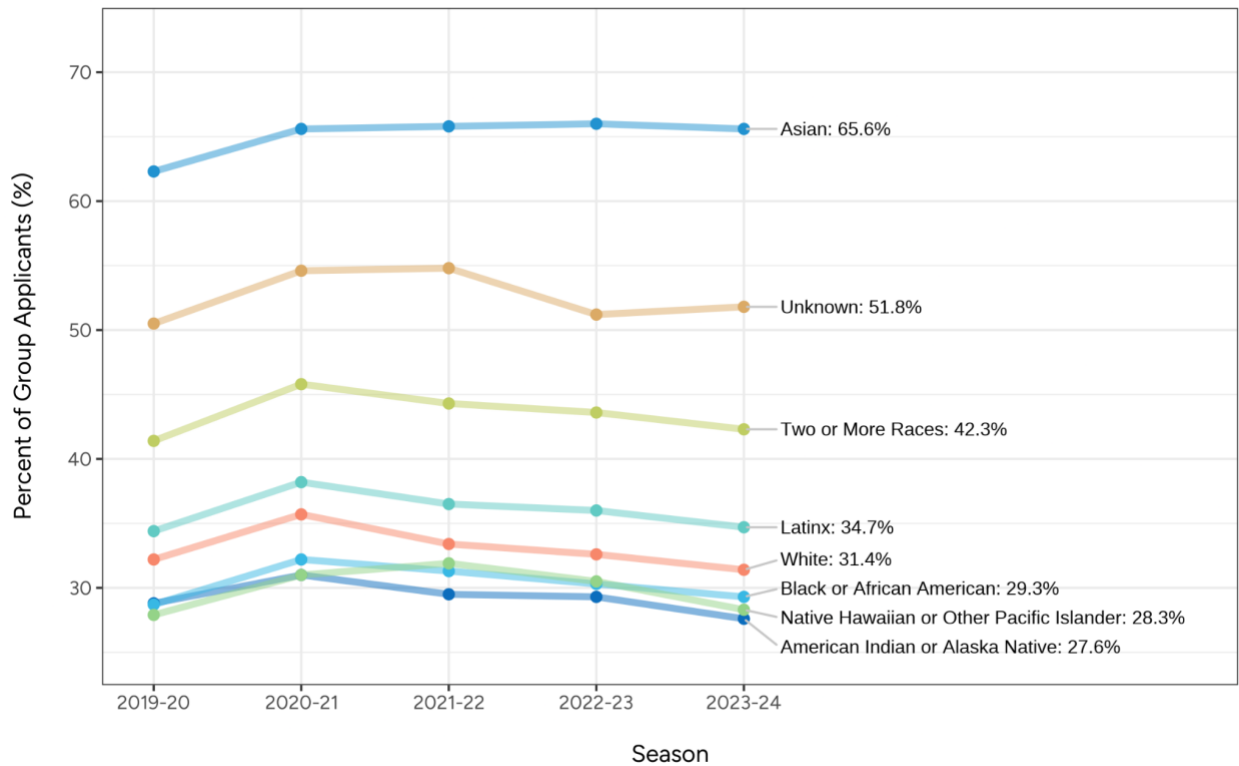

These overarching trends do not signal a meaningful behavioral change in response to the Supreme Court decision across the whole applicant pool. However, could there be more happening among specific student subgroups like high-achievers and low-income, first-generation students?

To examine this possibility, in Figure 7 we focus on academically high-achieving students by URM grouping, again for the outcome of applying to at least one most selective institution. To be included in this subset, students must have either scored at the 95th percentile on the SAT/ACT, or have reported a GPA in the 95th percentile or higher (as calculated for the season of application) on their GPA scale. Between 14% and 17% of the domestic applicants in each season analyzed in the prior plots are thus defined as "high achieving" by these criteria.

Figure 7. Percent of high SAT/ACT or high GPA students in each URM grouping applying to at least one most selective institution since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
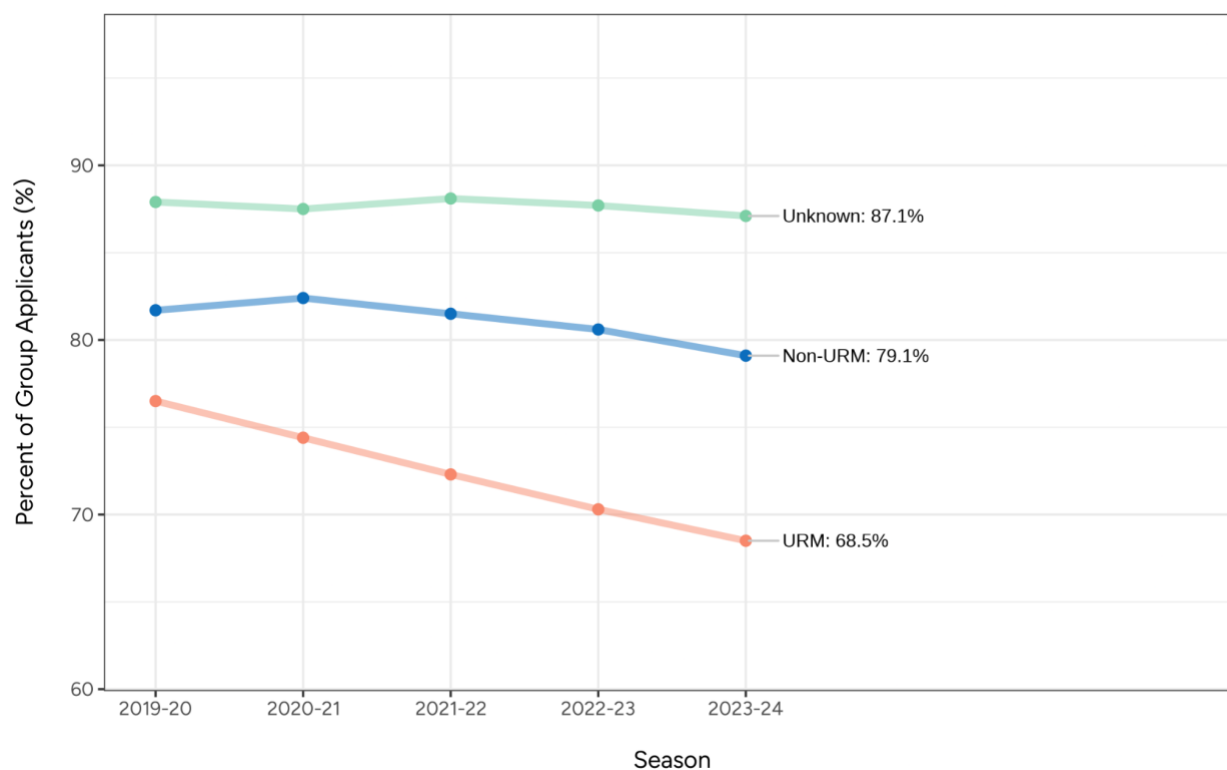
We don't see any meaningful deviations from pre-existing trends in the 2023–24 season; all lines look to be straight since at least the 2021–22 season. Do these results look different when we disaggregate URM groupings into standard race/ethnicity groups? In Figure 8, we show that they do not; there remains no deviation from existing trends even when disaggregated.

For these subgroup plots, note that we remove any groups with fewer than 1,000 applicants in it for visual clarity (as these smaller groups necessarily have more volatile application trends that are difficult to interpret).

Figure 8. Percent of high SAT/ACT or high GPA students in each race/ethnicity group applying to at least one most selective institution since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
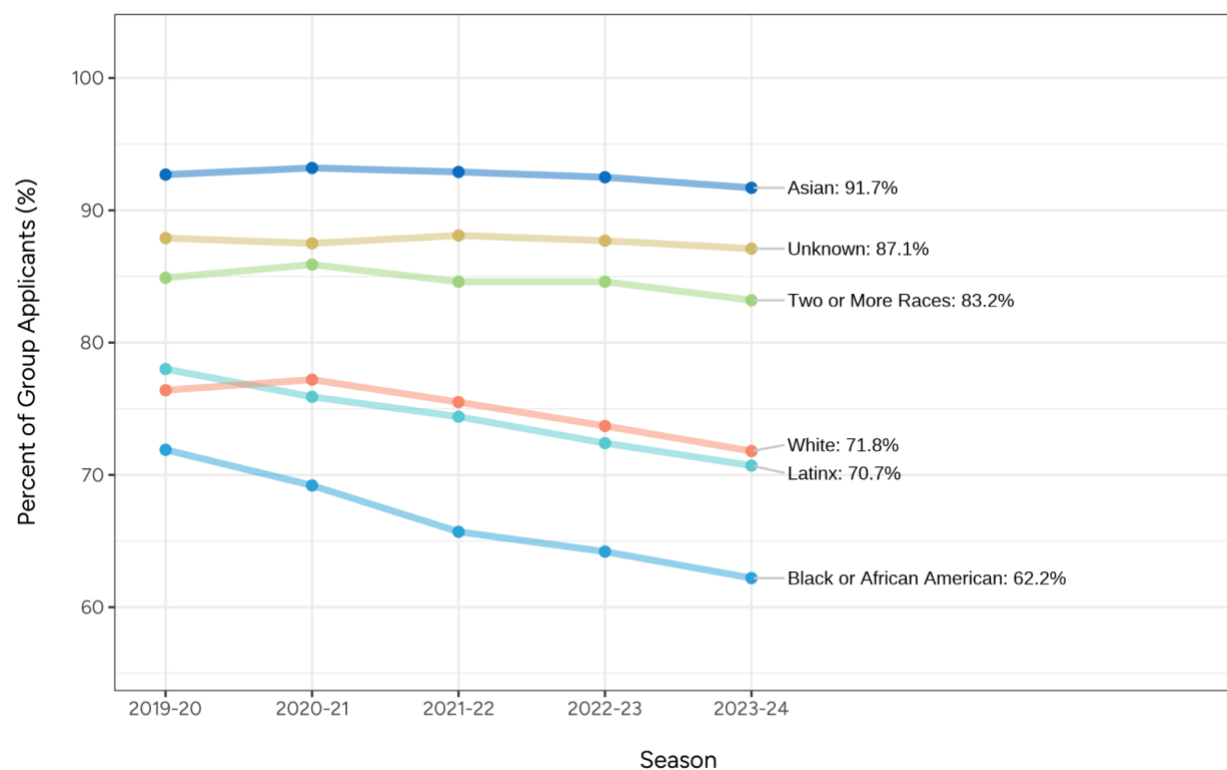

What if we instead focus on students with lower-socioeconomic status? For this analysis, we focus on students who reported at least one indicator of low-income status (living in a below median ZIP community, or indicating that they were eligible for a Common App Fee Waiver), in addition to also reporting that they were a first-generation applicant. Between 21% and 26% of the domestic applicants in each season analyzed in the prior plots meet these criteria.

Figure 9 charts the percent of low-income, first-generation students in each URM grouping that applied to at least one most selective institution. While there is a noticeable spike in the 2020–21 season (which we've reported on in past Deadline Updates in relation to the major shift in test-optional policies at that time), trends since 2021–22 are generally consistent in declining through the present season for all groups.

Figure 9. Percent of low-income, first-generation students in each URM grouping applying to at least one most selective institution since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
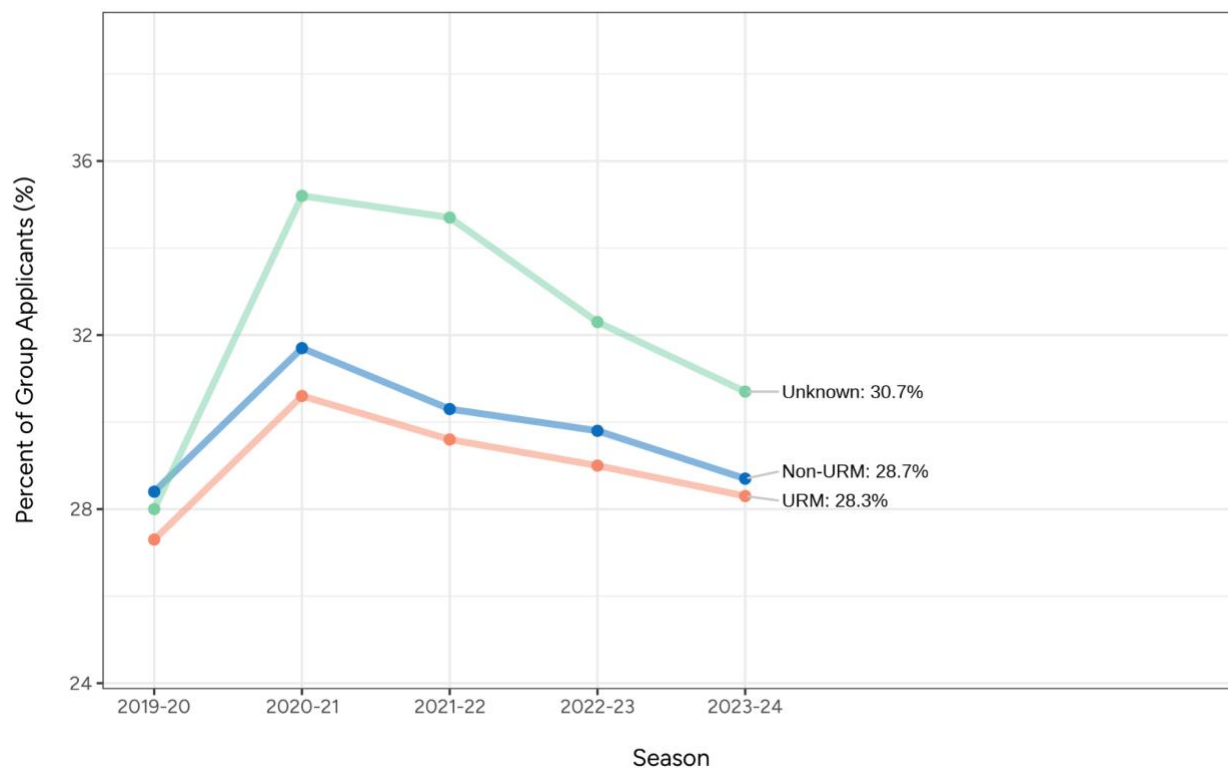
In Figure 10, we again disaggregate results into their constituent standard race/ethnicity groupings, but do not observe any meaningful deviations from trend. Note that while we don't include these results in the present report, we similarly observe no noticeable trends across groups when we focus specifically on students who are neither low-income nor first-generation.

Figure 10. Percent of low-income, first-generation students in each race/ethnicity group applying to at least one most selective institution since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
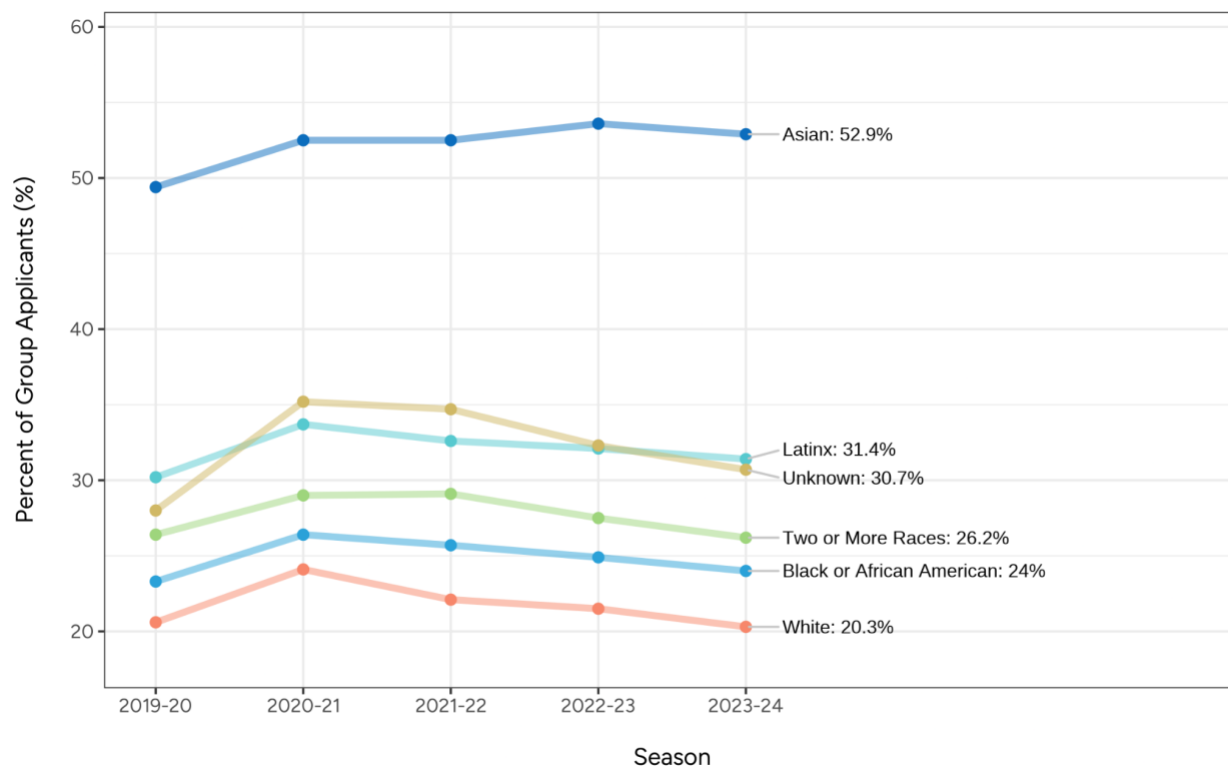
In summary, we don't see much happening in the way of students' application behaviors across racial/ethnic groups in this past season, in particular. While we cannot speak definitively, this suggests to us that students are generally not responding strongly to the Supreme Court decision in terms of their overall college aspirations.

Trends in institutional application pools

While we see very little happening with respect to applicant racial/ethnic identity and their overall application behaviors, a related but distinct question remains: is the diversity of the average institution's applicant pool changing?

We begin analysis of this question by considering all returning members in Figure 11. In this plot, we display the average percent of all returning members' applicant pools that identify as each standard race/ethnicity group since the 2019–20 season.[2] As before, we are looking to see if there are any major deviations from existing trends in the 2023–24 season for any group; there do not appear to be any such deviations present in this plot.

Figure 11. Average percent of all returning members' applicant pools identifying as each race/ethnicity group since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30

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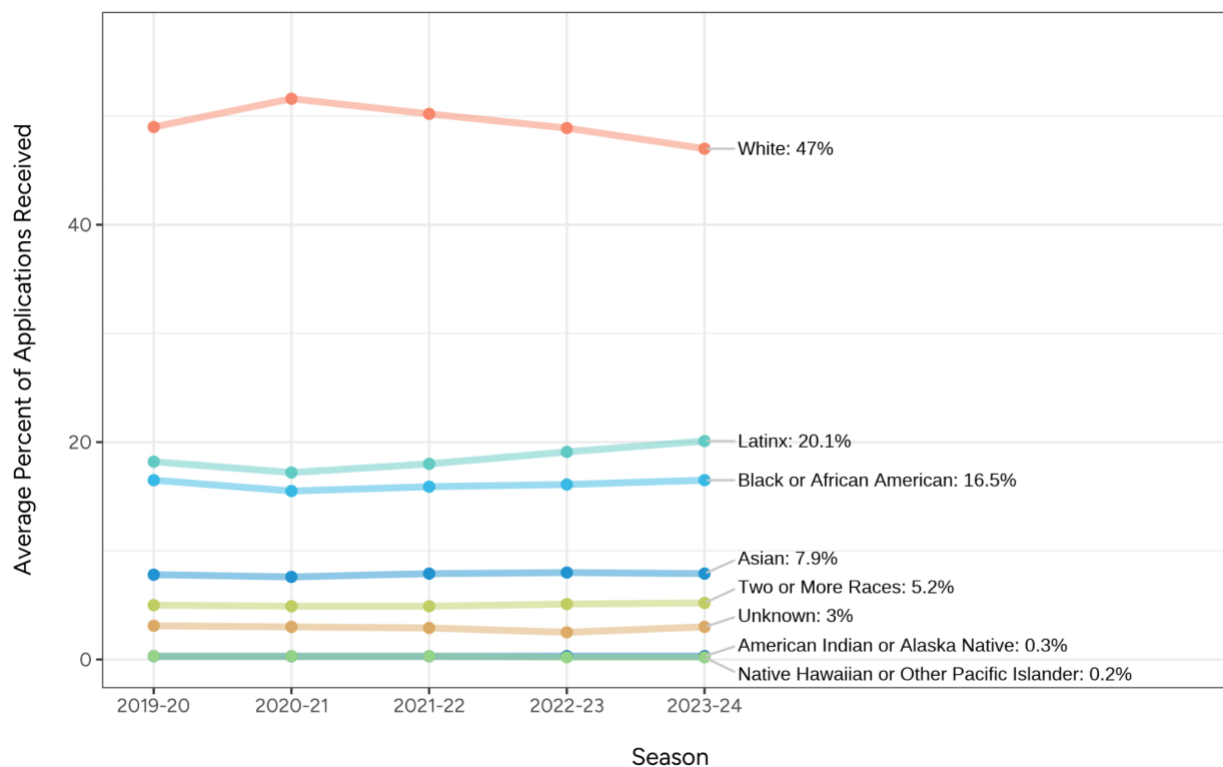
[2] To be specific, we calculate the percent of applicants in each member's applicant pool that identify as each race/ethnicity. We then average those percentages across the relevant members to arrive at the figures for this analysis. We do not weight these averages by application pool size, though we find that the narrative of the results do not change when doing so.

This may be intuitive, especially as the vast majority of returning members in our sample are generally less selective, and thus may be perceived to be less affected by the change in race-conscious admissions practices. What if we focus specifically on most selective institutions (those with admit rates below 25%)? Figure 12 replicates Figure 11, but focuses on the average applicant pool demographics of the most selective members. These plots also show little of note for the 2023–24 season, with the same exception as before for Unknown students (with the anomalous dip in the 2022–23 season making the return-to-trend in 2023–24 look more meaningful than it may actually be).

Figure 12. Average percent of most selective returning members' applicant pools identifying as each race/ethnicity group since 2019–20
Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
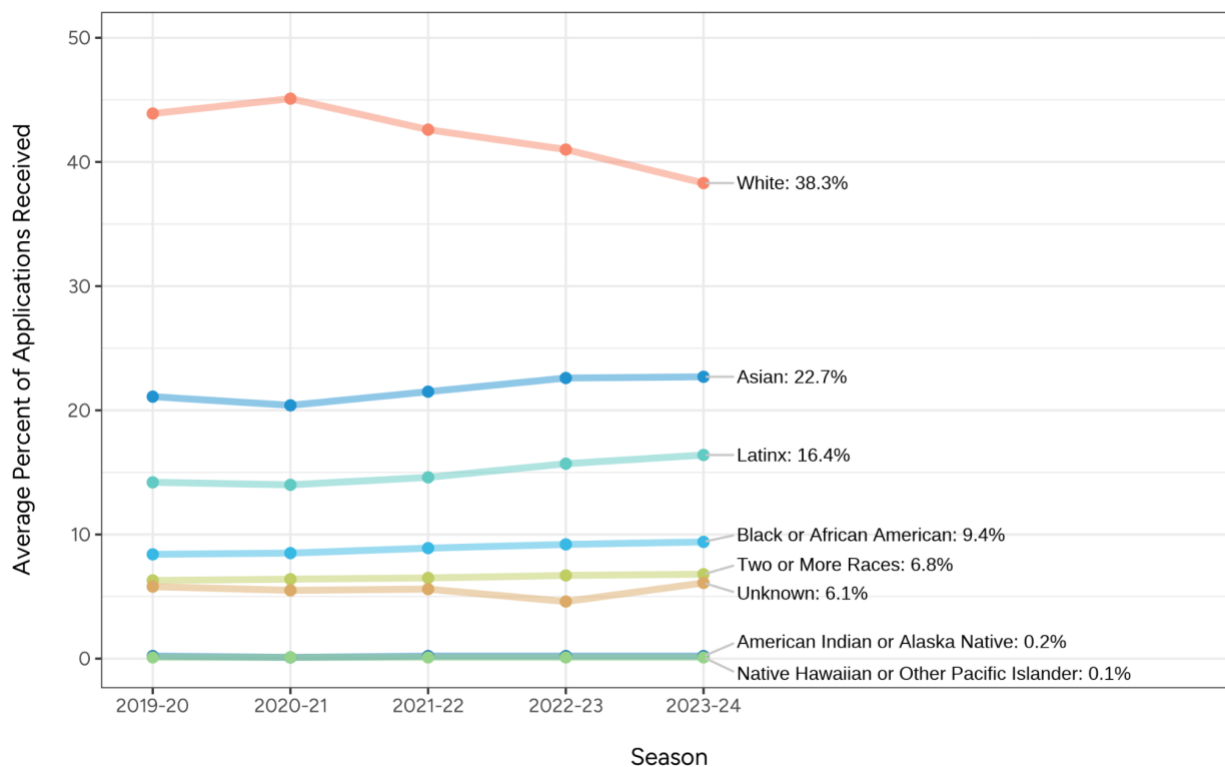
While the overall demographics of the applicant pool may not have changed on average for either all returning members, or the most selective returning members, perhaps demographics are changing within specific subsets of the applicant pool? As before, we subset to students who are particularly high-achieving academically (students scoring at least at the 95th percentile on the SAT/ACT, or have reported a GPA in the 95th percentile or higher in the season of their application on their GPA scale). Figure 13 displays the average percent of the high-achieving applicant pool that the most selective institutions received from each race/ethnicity group.

Figure 13. Average percent of most selective returning members' high-achieving applicant pools identifying as each race/ethnicity group since 2019–20
Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
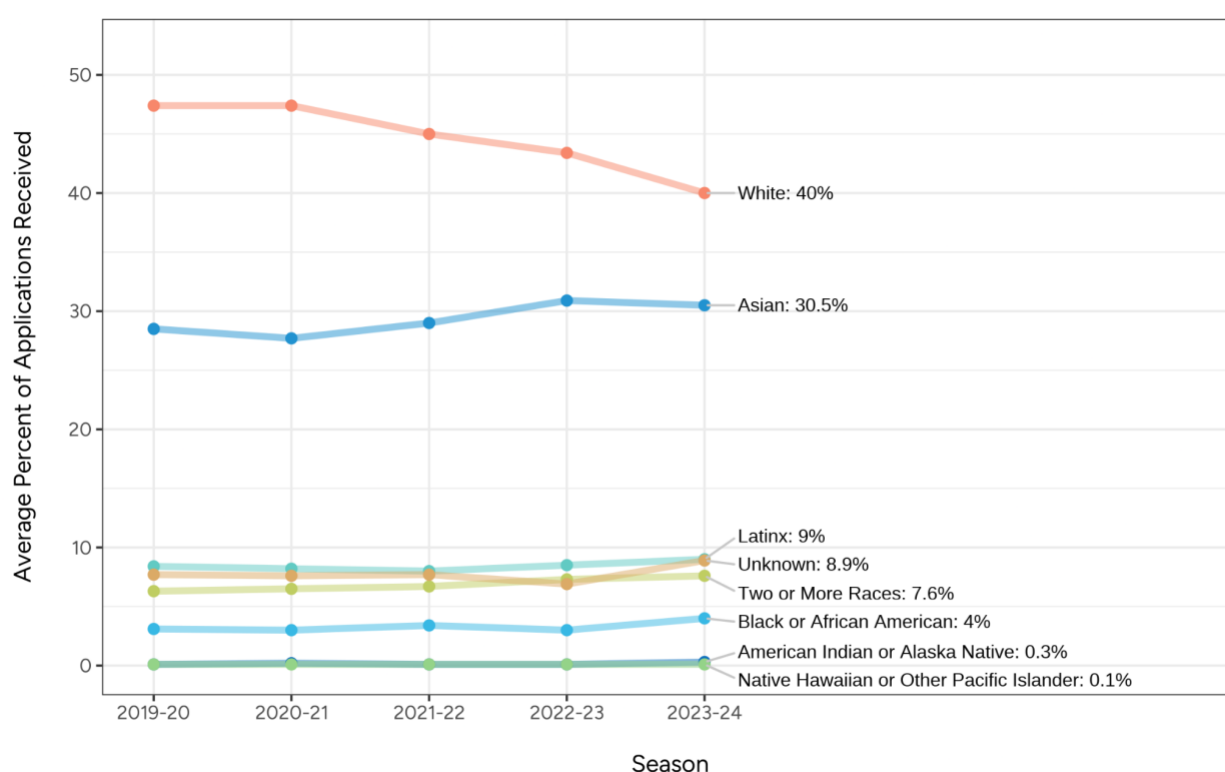

In this plot, we see a slight flattening of the Asian group line in the 2023–24 season, paired also with a slightly larger decrease in the White group, and a slight increase in the Unknown group, all relative to their prior trajectories (i.e., trends established from 2020–21 through 2022–23). That being said, the small magnitude of these shifts make them difficult to interpret – although they are visually perceptible, they are still within a range that observers could reasonably consider to just be noise or on-trend.

Finally, we also examine the extent to which the average applicant pool to the most selective institutions has changed when looking specifically at students who reported at least one indicator of low-income status (living in a below median ZIP community, or

indicating that they were eligible for a Common App Fee Waiver), in addition to also reporting that they were a first-generation applicant, in Figure 14. Most trend-lines here look consistent with trajectories established from 2020–21 through 2022–23, with the only possible exception being a slightly faster increase in the proportion of applicants identifying as Latinx in 2023–24.

Figure 14. Average percent of most selective returning members' low-income, first-generation applicant pools identifying as each race/ethnicity group since 2019–20
Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
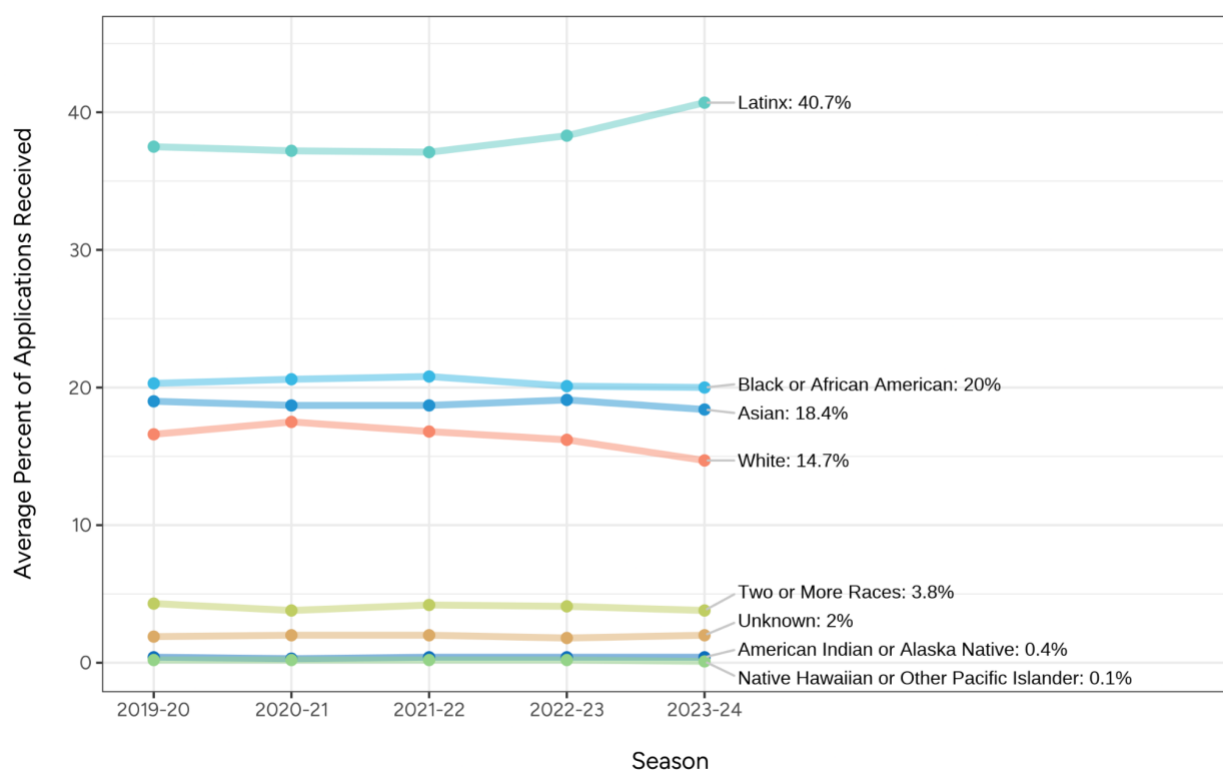
Writ large, the findings from the institutional perspective, on average, look to mirror what we see regarding students' application behavior more broadly: There seems to be relatively little about 2023–24 of note when considering this year's data in the context of prior trends.

Trends in the use of race/ethnicity phrases in student essays

The Supreme Court noted one conspicuous exception to the consideration of student race/ethnicity in their decision: "At the same time, as all parties agree, nothing in this opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise." Thus, as the final component of this analysis, we examine whether students are

choosing to discuss their racial/ethnic identity in their Common App Personal Essays more frequently this season versus prior seasons.

For this component of the analysis, we consider applicants to returning members that submitted a complete Personal Essay as part of their application. For the sake of simplicity and to make as few assumptions as possible, we implemented a simple "word search" approach to ask: Which students included a word or phrase unambiguously tied to discussion of racial/ethnic identity in their Personal Essay? Because of the simplicity of this analysis, we note that we cannot say for certain that a student is discussing their *own* identity (i.e., they may be discussing the racial/ethnic identity of a friend, relative, etc.), and that we are not exhaustive in the words or phrases we're searching for.

That being said, we leverage the longitudinal aspect of our data to at least partially overcome this concern: even if we have an incomplete set of words to search for, the time trends we establish for prior seasons help establish a reasonable "baseline" for analysis of the 2023–24 season. Even if we're missing phrases, major changes in the share of students using this specific set of words over time should still be indicative of an overall trend. We present the following terms[3] for our analysis:

> "black student", "black person", "black people", "black child", "black man", "black woman", "black girl", "black boy", "white student", "white person", "white people", "white girl", "white boy", "white child", "white man", "white woman", "african american", "african-american", "african", "latinx", "hispanic", "latina", "latino", "hawaiian", "pacific islander", "asian", "alaska native", "american indian", "tribal", "tribe", "indian", "native american", "multiracial", "multi-racial", "multi-ethnic", "multiethnic", "racial", "ethnic"

In Figure 15, we plot the proportion of students in each URM group who used at least one of the aforementioned racial/ethnic phrases in their Personal Essay, for each season. Other than a large spike in 2020–21 for URM students, and to a lesser extent non-URM students,[4] trends here do not seem to indicate a major shift in the 2023–24 season. All three groups declined in their use of racial/ethnic phrases from 2021–22 to 2023–24 in roughly equal measure.

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[3] Note that we include phrases for Black and White specifically to reduce ambiguity in use relative to other racial/ethnic groups. That is, the word "Black" can be used in many contexts that are not racially related (e.g., "It was black and white to me"), and so we focus on phrases that tie Black to nouns like man, girl, boy, student, etc. to reduce that ambiguity. This approach seemed less necessary for phrases like "african-american" and "pacific islander" because those tend to be focused on individuals more often.

[4] While there are many possible explanations for this sudden increase in racial/ethnic phrases being used in Personal Essays in 2020–21, we think it is most likely students responding to amplified national discourse on race/ethnicity in the summer of 2020. The 2020–21 application season followed immediately after.

Figure 15. Percent of applicants using at least one race/ethnicity related phrase in their essay by URM groupings since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
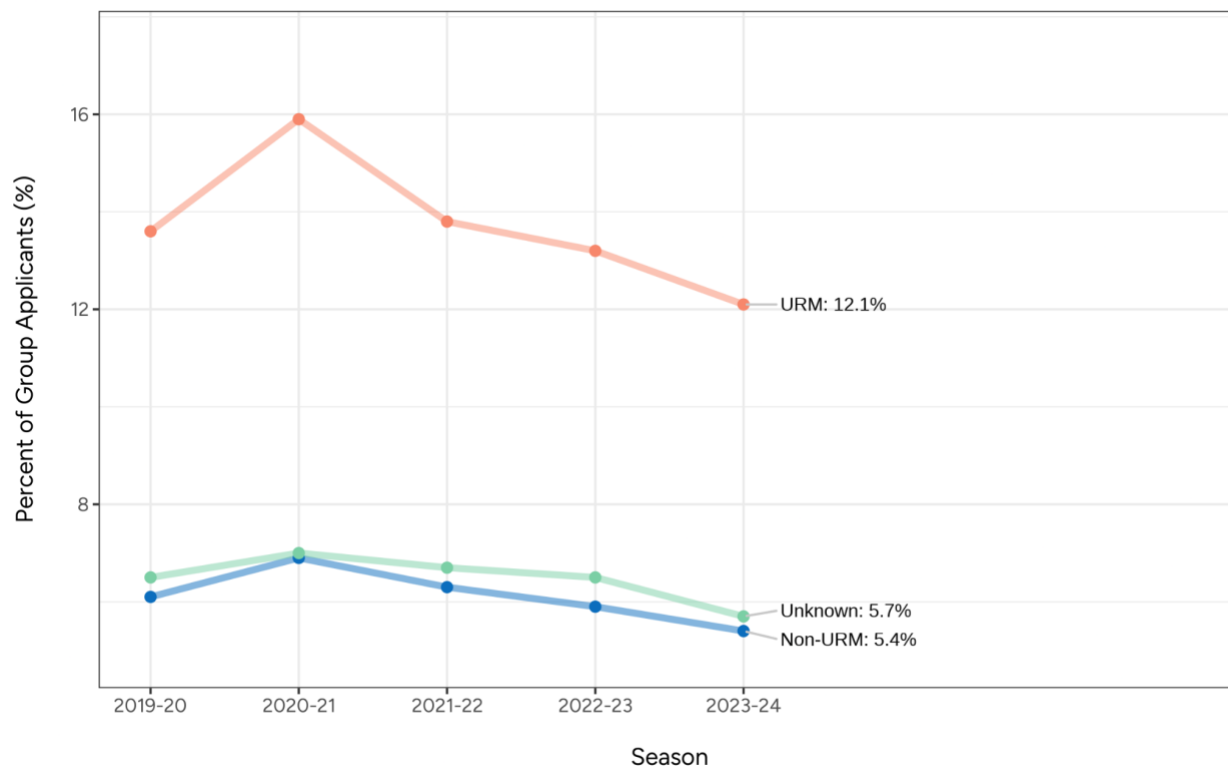
Do these trends look different or contain additional nuance when breaking each URM group out into their constituent standard race/ethnicity categories? Figure 16 reveals that most lines remained "in-trend" from 2021–22 through 2023–24, with the exception of American Indian or Alaska Native students, who saw appreciably increased rates of using race/ethnicity phrases in 2023–24 relative to other groups. All other groups moved roughly in parallel from 2022–23 to 2023–24. White and Unknown students were consistently least likely to use any such phrases.

Figure 16. Percent of applicants using at least one race/ethnicity related phrase in their essay by race/ethnicity group since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
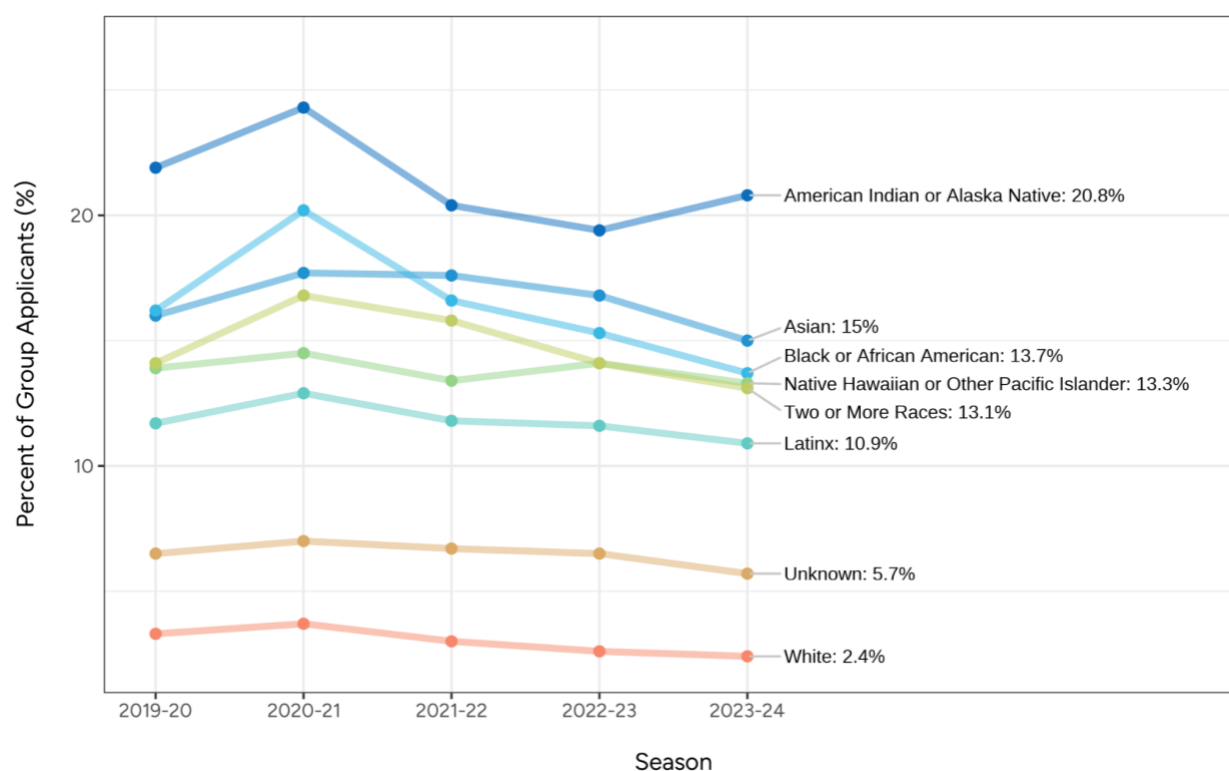
As with prior analyses, we can subset specifically to students who were high-achieving academically (top 95th percentile for SAT/ACT or GPA on their reported scale in the year of application) in Figure 17. Among this group of students, we see that the trendline for URM students leveled-out in their use of racial/ethnic phrases from 2022–23 to 2023–24, in contrast to the continued decrease that non-URM and Unknown students saw in the same time period. This may reflect the notion that higher-achieving students are more likely to have been aware of these finer details of the Supreme Court decision (either due to greater levels of political/news engagement, or due to more engaged support networks), and thus more likely to respond in their essay writing. This could also reflect the idea that these are competitive students who see the disclosure of race as more relevant and beneficial to their circumstances (i.e., high-achievers applying for admission to more selective institutions).

Figure 17. Percent of high-achieving applicants using at least one race/ethnicity related phrase in their essay by URM groupings since 2019–20

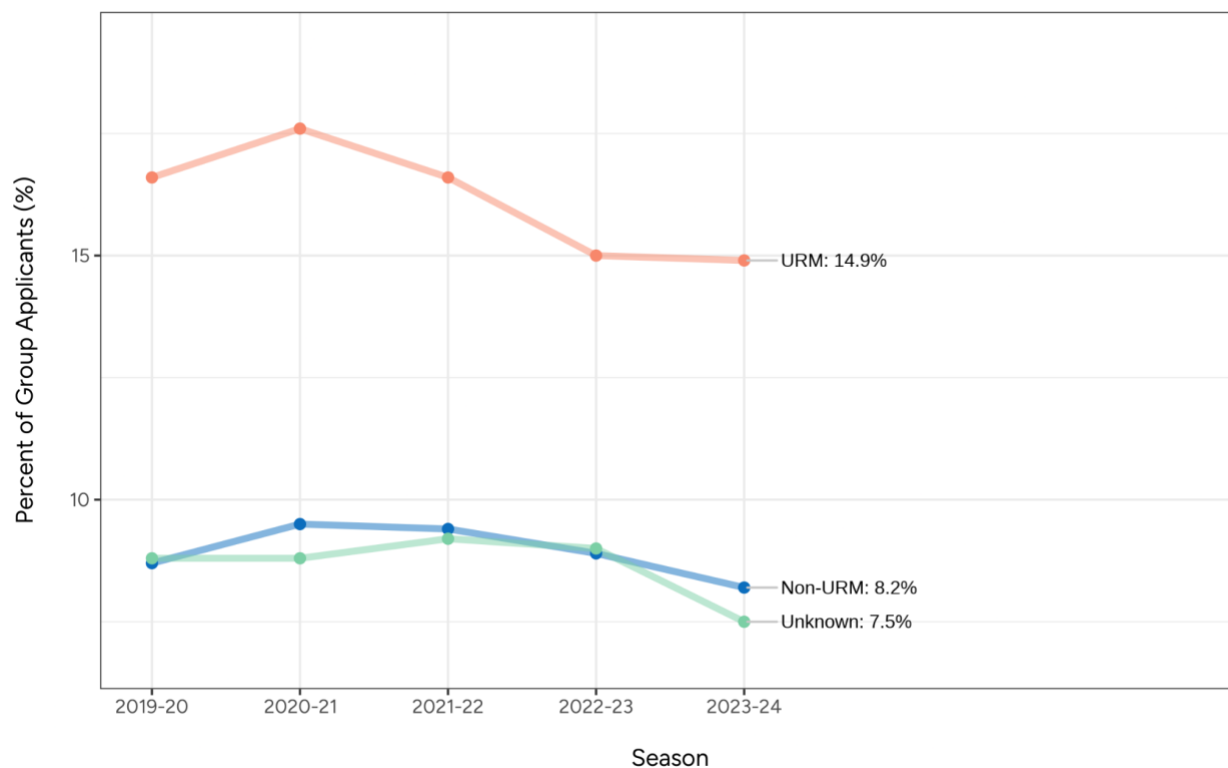Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30

Figure 18 breaks Figure 17 out into constituent race/ethnicity categories (noting again that we remove trendlines for any group containing fewer than 1,000 students for visual and interpretive clarity). We see here that the decline in non-URM racial/ethnic phrase use in Figure 17 seems mostly driven by Asian students, with White students remaining in-trend from 2021–22 through 2023–24.

Figure 18. Percent of high-achieving applicants using at least one race/ethnicity related phrase in their essay by race/ethnicity group since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30
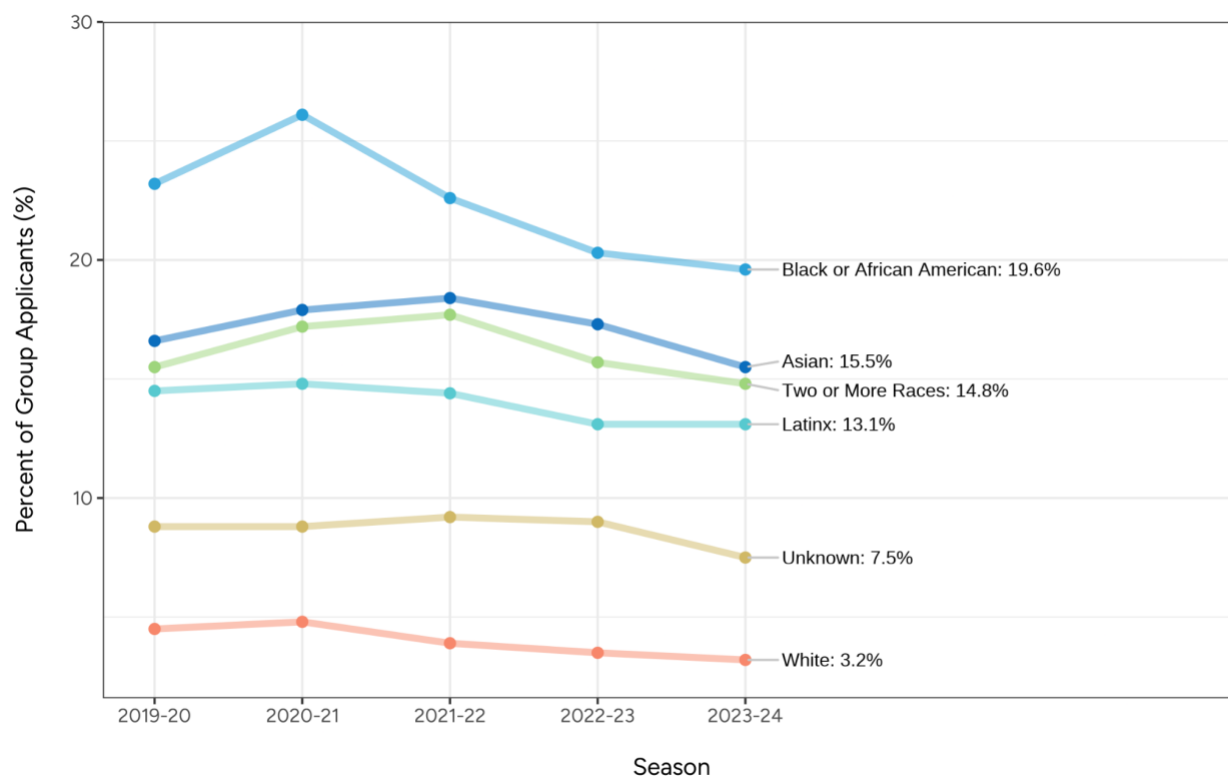
As the final slice of our analysis, we focus on students who are both low-income and first-generation in Figures 19 and 20. Across both plots, we see that students in most race/ethnicity groups saw a fairly consistent decline in their use of racial/ethnic phrases from the 2021–22 through the 2023–24 season, with perhaps a slightly faster decline for Asian students.

Figure 19. Percent of low-income, first-generation applicants using at least one race/ethnicity related phrase in their essay by URM groupings since 2019–20

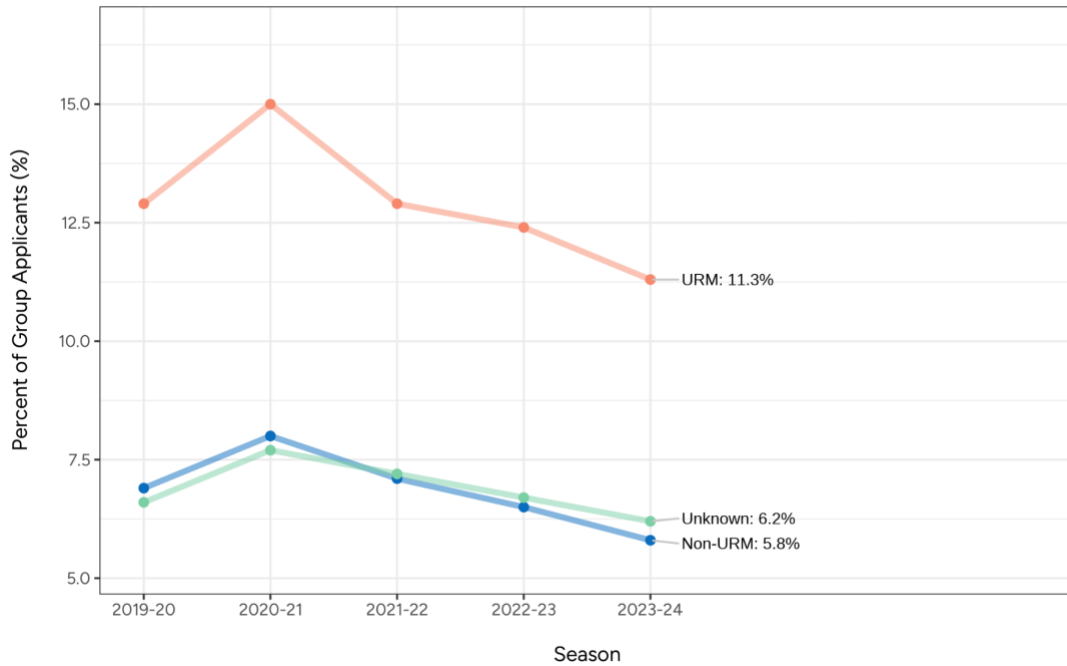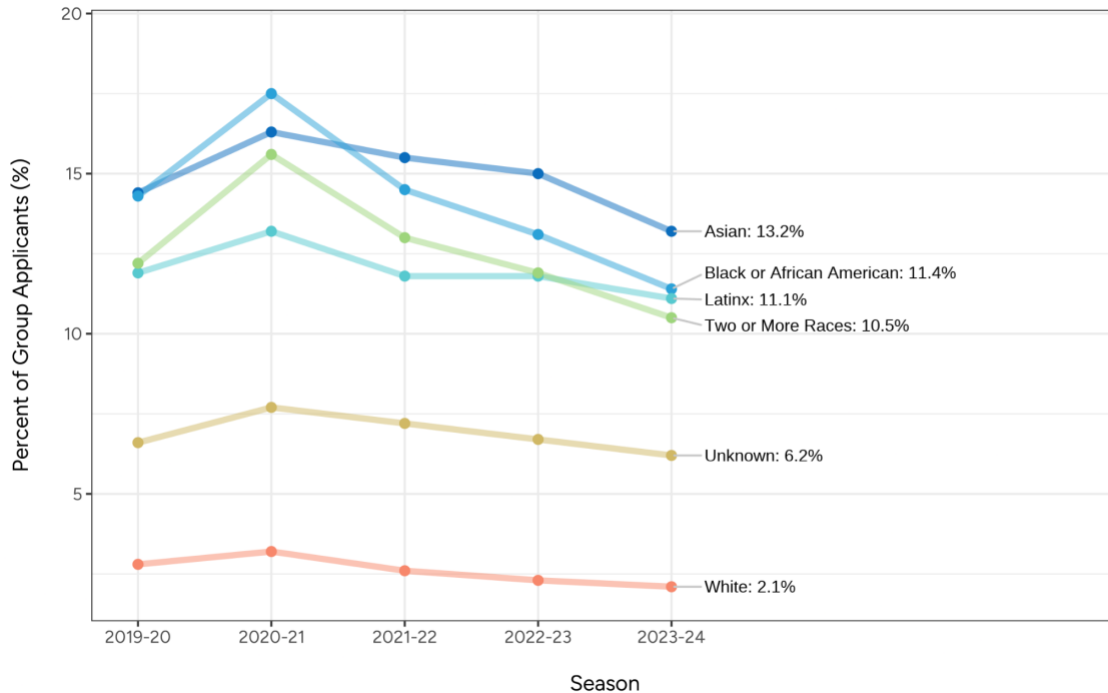Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30

Figure 20. Percent of low-income, first-generation applicants using at least one race/ethnicity related phrase in their essay by race/ethnicity since 2019–20

Among domestic applicants to domestic returning members; data through April 30

Conclusion

Across these many analyses, we find that in general, students seemed not to have responded in clear or pronounced ways to the Supreme Court decision with respect to their racial/ethnic self-identification on our platform or in their application behaviors. This is also reflected in a lack of major changes to the diversity of our members' application pools.

There are two qualifications to our broad observation of "business as usual" in this domain. First is the fact that the subset of most selective members on our platform may have experienced a slightly lower proportion of students identifying as Asian in the high-achieving portion of their applicant pools this season. Secondly, high-achieving URM applicants may be discussing their racial/ethnic identity in essays slightly more than is the case for high-achieving non-URM students this season.

We caution, however, against over-interpretation of these trends by reminding readers of their small magnitude in the context of the inherent noisiness of our season-by-season data, and of the overall descriptive (non-causal) nature of these analyses.

Importantly, these results are not to suggest that students and institutions were outright not impacted by the Supreme Court decisions. Rather, these results suggest that the impacts are not clearly seen in these application metrics in this first season after the decision. It remains to be seen whether applicant and application behaviors change more measurably going into next season, as students and their families gain greater clarity about the repercussions of these court decisions in terms of the admissions and enrollment outcomes that are beyond the scope of this analysis. We eagerly anticipate data and insights from peer organizations and institutions on those important admissions and enrollment metrics.