Research summary: First-year applicant gender and pronoun trends from 2021–2023

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Introduction

During the 2021–2022 application season, Common App made changes to its gender identity questions to better reflect the more than one million students who use the platform each year.

Over 4 million students have used the Common App to apply to college since these changes to the application went into effect. With the rich array of additional demographic data that students submit through the platform, our data warehouse now represents one of the most expansive and multifaceted datasets on college-going student gender and pronoun use in the country.

In this brief, we share and summarize the findings of a research partnership with Dr. Genny Beemyn, director of the University of Massachusetts Amherst Stonewall Center. Through this research, they describe how students navigated these gender and pronoun questions over the last three years, as well as how student gender and pronouns relate to other key characteristics of student identity like race/ethnicity, first-generation status, and geographic region, among others. More specifically, we summarize a subset of their

results for the following research questions in this brief:

- What percent of applicants in the 2023–24 application season identified as trans and/or nonbinary? How does this vary by students' legal sex and over time?
    - What were the most common write-in gender options provided by students in the 2023–24 season? How has this changed over time since 2021–22?
- What were the most common pronouns among students in each gender and legal sex group? How has this changed over time since 2021–22?
- How did gender and pronoun use relate to students' other demographic responses (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, first-generation status, family/household structure, high school type, and applicant region)?

Dr. Beemyn's in-depth descriptive analyses allow us to consider and nuance key trends in how adolescents and young adults are choosing to identify themselves along these dimensions. We hope these insights offer critical context for campus leaders, student support staff, admissions officers, and others who support students to and through college.

For those interested in greater detail beyond this summary brief, see Dr. Beemyn's peer-reviewed research featured in the *International Journal of LGBTQ+ Youth Studies*.

Contents

Key findings

1. **2.5% of applicants identified as trans and nonbinary in the 2023–24 application season**, up approximately 0.3 percentage points ("pp") from 2.2% in 2021–22 for a 14% relative increase over the two years. While the percent of students identifying as trans and nonbinary is generally small at 2.5%, this still represents ~31,000 students in the present population.

2. **Students are increasingly choosing to disclose their gender on the application**. The percent of students opting <u>not</u> to report their gender was 1.4% in 2023–24, down substantially from 2.4% in 2021–22 (-1pp, or a 42% relative decrease).

3. **The vast majority (76.6%) of trans and nonbinary students are identifying at least partly as nonbinary as of 2023–24**, though this is a decreasing share over time (down from 83.3% in 2021–22, or -6.7pp). Simultaneously, the share of trans and nonbinary students more specifically identifying as trans men is up substantially to 16.7% in 2023–24 (up from 10.7% in 2021–22, or +6.0pp).

4. **Students identifying as Two or More Races (3.7%), American Indian or Alaska Native (3.1%), and White (2.9%) were substantially more likely to report a trans and nonbinary gender in 2023–24 relative to the overall population (2.5%).** Conversely, students identifying as Asian (1.8%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1.7%), and Black or African American (1.6%) were substantially less likely to do so. By contrast, **there was not a strong relationship between student first-generation status and rates of trans and nonbinary identity**.

5. The most common write-in genders submitted by students were: Genderfluid (43.6% in 2023–24), agender (11.9%), genderqueer (8.9%), trans man (7.5%), demigirl (3.6%), questioning (2.9%), trans masculine (2.2%), and trans woman (2.1%). There were over 100 unique write-in responses in 2023–24, though the distribution of responses is becoming more concentrated into fewer genders over time.

6. Students also submitted a wide range of write-in pronouns in their applications. There were 48 unique pronoun responses in 2023–24, a figure that was down substantially from 71 in 2021–22. Taken together with trends in write-in gender responses, this suggests that **students may be gravitating towards a more unified set of genders and pronouns**.

Gender and pronoun data context

Before we dive into the results, it is important to understand how students navigate the gender and pronoun questions in the application as illustrated in Figure 1 below. On Common App, students are able to identify their legal sex (female and male, with X or another legal sex added as an option in 2023) separately from their gender (female, male, or nonbinary), with the additional option to provide another gender using an open-response text box. Students report their pronouns (he/him, she/her, and they/them) in a similar way, with the parallel option to write in another pronoun set. Both the gender and pronouns questions are optional, and students can select multiple response options for each question.

Figure 1. Sex, gender, and pronoun questions on the Common App

The format of these questions is flexible and inclusive by design, and this allows for multi-layered responses from students. For example, students might identify as both Male and Nonbinary for their gender, while also writing in an additional gender. Similarly, students might select She/Her pronouns while writing in They/Them pronouns (even though the option is already available). In this way, grouping students into meaningfully similar identities for the purposes of this study was an immense challenge to which Dr. Beemyn brought instrumental expertise and

contextual knowledge. Although we focus here on summarizing high-level findings, more detail is available in their complete research.

Finally, note that Dr. Beemyn's study focuses on students residing in the United States who successfully submitted at least one application in their respective application year. While they report on a wide variety of across- and within-year dynamics in their full paper, we'll generally focus this summary brief only on the subset of their results spanning all three years of data. Note also that a full glossary of the key terms used throughout this brief is available in the Appendix.

Trends in student gender identity

Beginning with broad trends in students' responses to the sex and gender questions over time, Figure 2 shows the percent of applicants in each season identifying as one of four response groups: female sex and female gender (i.e., presumably cis[1] women), male sex and male gender (i.e., presumably cis men), combined trans[2] or nonbinary responses, and students not providing any gender response ("Unknown"). The label on each group indicates the percent of applicants in 2023 belonging to that group, and we report on the percentage point ("pp") change in that group since the first 2021–22 season.

For example, the percent of students reporting male sex and male gender was 42.6% in 2023, and that has remained almost constant since 2021 (0pp change). Students reporting female sex and female gender trend similarly, with 53.5% of applicants falling into this group, up only slightly from 52.8% in 2021. Conversely, the percent of students identifying as trans and nonbinary was 2.5% in 2023, up approximately 0.3pp from 2.2% in 2021 for a 14% relative increase. For reference, while the percent of students identifying as trans and nonbinary is generally small at 2.5%, this still represents approximately 31,000 students in our sample. Finally, the percent of students opting not to report their gender was only 1.4% in 2023, down substantially from 2.4% in 2021 (-1pp, or a 42% relative decrease).

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[1] "Cis" refers to individuals who identify with the sex that was assigned to them at birth (i.e., people who are not trans). A complete glossary of all the key terms used in this brief is available in the Appendix.

[2] For the purposes of Dr. Beemyn's work and our summaries here, we identify students as trans if they selected a gender identity that was different from their legal sex. Additional explanations for these terms, and other trans and nonbinary terms used in this brief, can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 2. Trends in applicant sex and gender response groups since 2021–22
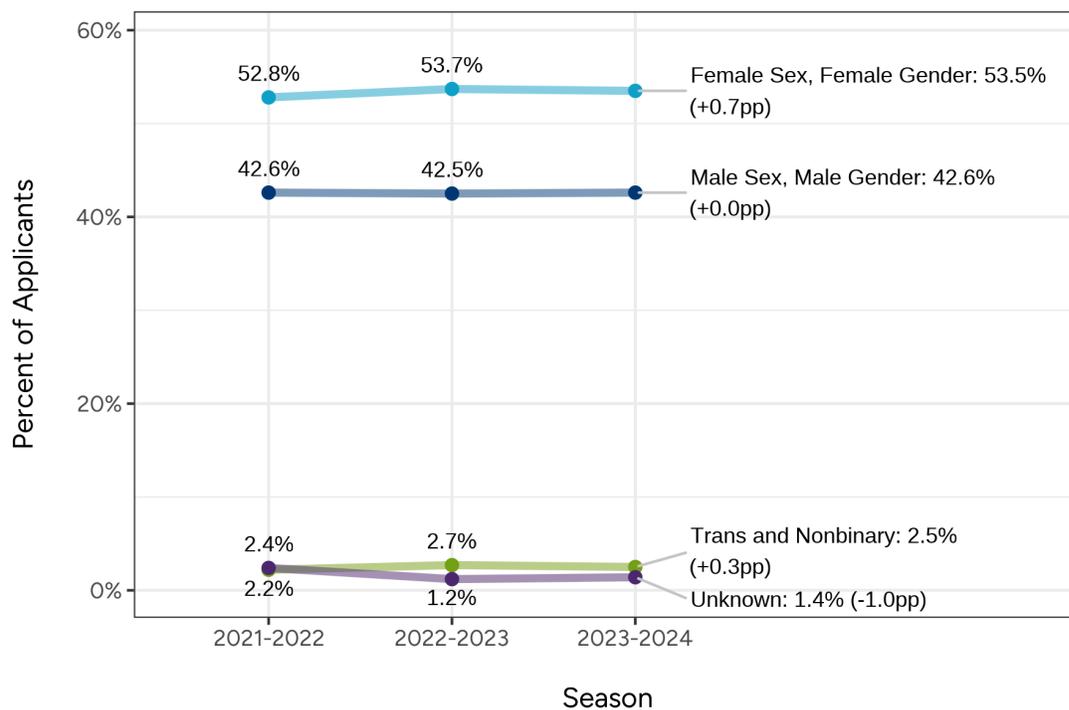

In Figure 3, we unpack the set of students in the trans and nonbinary group further into trans men, trans women, and nonbinary individuals. Trans men were individuals who indicated their legal sex as female and their gender identity as male, or who wrote in that they were trans male/men; trans women were individuals who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender identity as female, or who wrote in that they were trans female/women. Nonbinary students were individuals who indicated one or more nonbinary identities, even if they also indicated a male/man or female/woman identity. Percentages reported in this figure are out of the total number of trans and nonbinary applicants in the given season (i.e., the trans and nonbinary numbers reported in the prior figure). For example, among students identifying as trans and nonbinary in 2023 (2.5% of all U.S. applicants per Figure 2), the vast majority were more specifically nonbinary at 76.6%, down from 83.3% in 2021 (-6.7pp).

A growing share of students in this group are identifying as trans men, up to 16.7% in 2023 from 10.7% in 2021 (+6pp), while the share of students identifying as trans women is relatively more consistent at 6.7% in 2023 and 6.0% in 2021. While not pictured here, it is also worth noting that most of the students identifying their gender as nonbinary also reported a female legal sex at about 80% (with about 20% reporting a male legal sex); when combined with the far larger population of trans

men than trans women, this aligns with [prior literature](#) on the subject, suggesting that nonbinary and trans identity is generally more common among students with a female legal sex.

Figure 3. Trends in trans and nonbinary applicant response groups since 2021–22
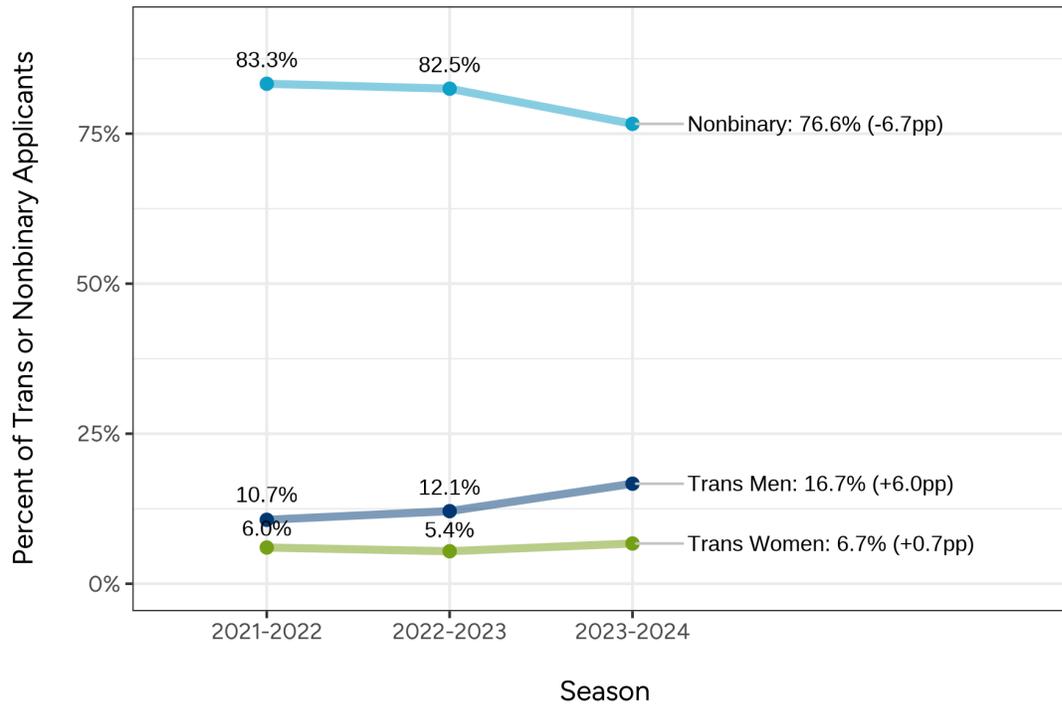

While Figures 2 and 3 include students who opted to write-in another gender, Dr. Beemyn manually grouped them into the most appropriate categories above. Focusing in on these students more specifically, about 3,500 students each season chose to write in a total of about 100 unique responses through these means.

In Figure 4, we report the most common write-in responses among these students.[3] For example, 43.6% of students writing in their own gender in 2023 indicated they were specifically genderfluid, followed by 11.9% indicating they were agender, and 8.9% indicating they were genderqueer. The decreasing share of students in the "Another identity" category since 2021 (-0.9pp to 17.2% in 2023) indicates students may be slowly gravitating towards fewer, more unified gender identities over this period.

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[3] For visual clarity, we include in the plot only those write-in responses that were consistently within the top 10 most common write-in responses across all three years. Explanations by Dr. Beemyn for each of these terms can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 4. Trends in applicant gender write-in groups since 2021–22
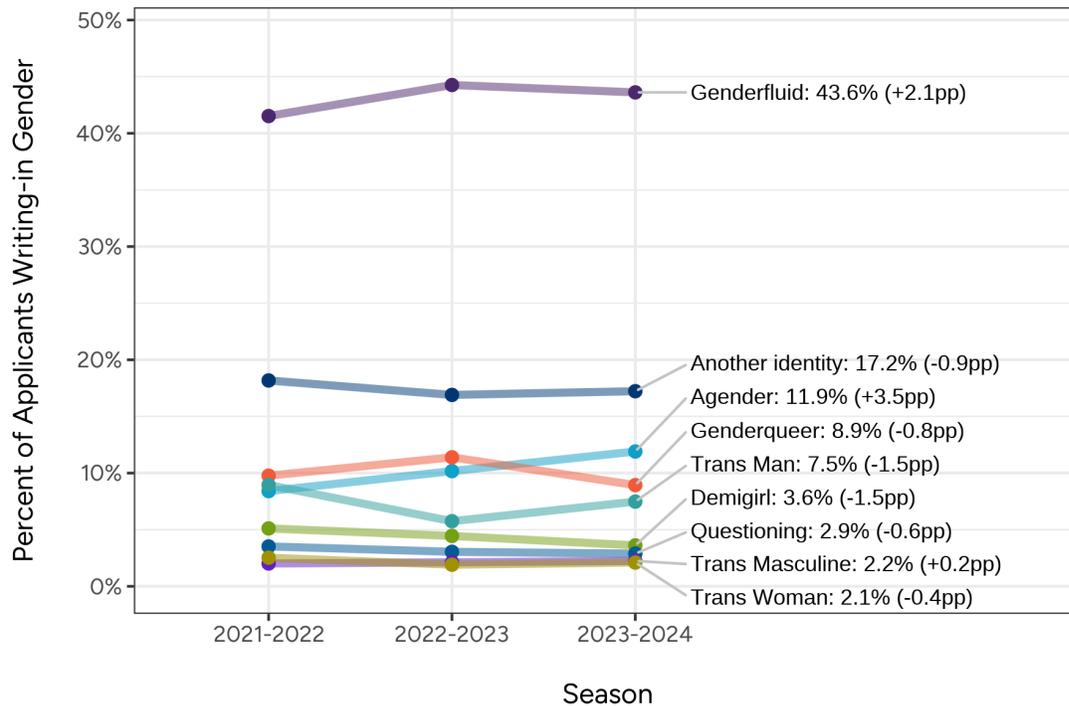
Gender identity and other student demographics

In addition to examining how students reported their gender over time, Dr. Beemyn also explored the relationship between gender and other key demographics like race/ethnicity and first-generation status, revealing more nuance in who reports trans and nonbinary identities across populations.

In Figure 5, we report the percent of students in each federal race/ethnicity group identifying as trans and nonbinary each year. Using the overall population reference from Figure 2 as a baseline (roughly 2.5% of students each year), we can see that students identifying as Two or More Races (3.7%), American Indian or Alaska Native (3.1%), and White (2.9%) were substantially more likely to report a trans and nonbinary gender in 2023. Conversely, students identifying as Asian (1.8%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1.7%), and Black or African American (1.6%) were substantially less likely.

Figure 5. Percent of applicants in each federal race/ethnicity group identifying as trans and nonbinary since 2021–22
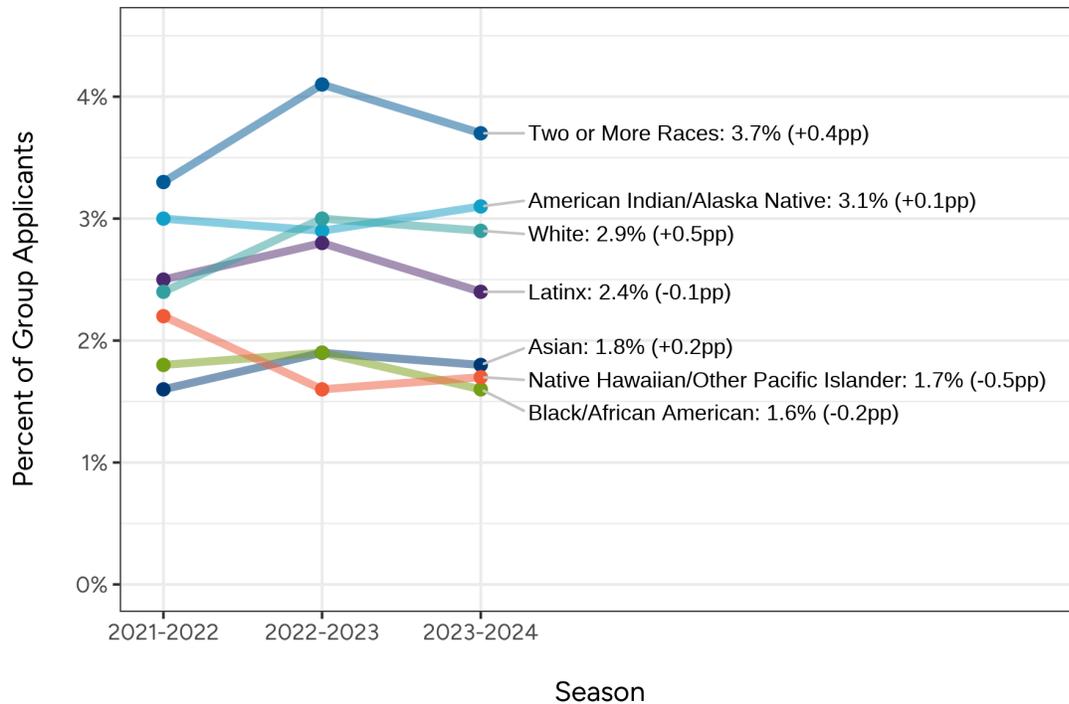

Figure 6 reports parallel statistics for first- and continuing-generation students identifying as trans and nonbinary in each year. Interestingly, we see much less variation between the two groups than with race/ethnicity in 2023: 2.4% of first-generation students identified as trans and nonbinary, while 2.5% of continuing-generation students did.

Figure 6. Percent of applicants in each first-generation group identifying as trans and nonbinary since 2021–22
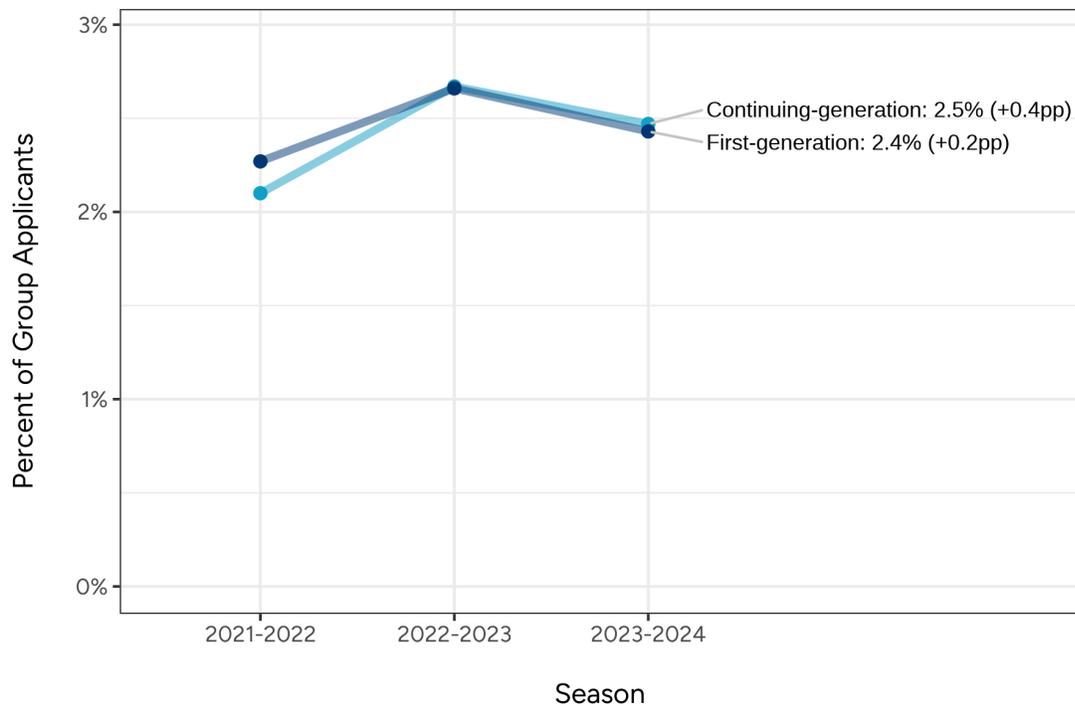
Please note that Dr. Beemyn's full report further includes cross-sectional statistics by high school type, geographic region, household structure, and more. For example, Dr. Beemyn finds that trans and nonbinary students were less likely to have parents who are married, and more likely to have parents who are divorced, than presumably cis women and cis men students. Similarly, trans and nonbinary students were more likely to attend public schools and home schools, and less likely to attend religious schools, than presumably cis men and women.

Trends in student pronouns

Importantly, students can select multiple pronouns completely independently of their sex and gender selections in the interface. To that point, approximately 3.2% of applicants selected pronouns beyond a single selection of "she/her" or "he/him" in 2023 (down slightly from 3.2% in 2021 and 3.8% in 2022), compared with 2.5% of applicants identifying as trans and nonbinary per Figure 2.

Table 1 displays the most common pronouns selected for each sex and gender group in 2023 (noting that a given student can select multiple sets of pronouns). For example, 98.3% of presumably cis women (female sex and female gender) selected

just she/her pronouns, while 1.7% selected pronouns beyond just she/her. Conversely, only 0.7% of presumably cis men (male sex and male gender) selected pronouns beyond just he/him. Nonbinary students were the most likely to select only they/them pronouns at 46.4%, and they also generally had the broadest spread of pronouns selected (all of which aligns with the general concept of nonbinary identity).

Table 1. Most common pronouns by student group in 2023–24

Student Group	Most Common Pronoun (% of row)	Second Most Common Pronouns (% of row)	Third Most Common Pronouns (% of row)
Female Sex, Female Gender	She/her (98.3%)	She/they * (>1.1%)	He/she/they * (>0.1%)
Male Sex, Male Gender	He/him (99.3%)	He/they * (>0.5%)	He/she/they * (>0.04%)
Nonbinary	They/them (46.4%)	He/she/they (15.3%)	She/they (13.4%)
Trans Women	She/her (76.1%)	She/they (14.1%)	He/him (6.9%)
Trans Men	He/him (82.3%)	He/they (13.1%)	She/her (3.1%)

* indicates a best estimate reflecting complexities in the manual coding of write-in responses

Similar to the gender write-in question, students also submitted a wide range of write-in pronouns in their applications. Interestingly, there were 48 unique pronoun responses in 2023, down substantially from 71 in 2021; this again suggests that students may be gravitating towards a more unified set of pronouns in general.

Lastly, Dr. Beemyn also reports on additional pronoun use trends by student race/ethnicity in the full reports. For example, trans women who identified as Black or African American reported using only he/him pronouns at over four times the rate of trans women who identified as White (18.1% versus 4.1%). Similarly, trans men who identified as Black or African American reported using only she/her pronouns (11.4%) substantially more than students identifying as Latinx (3.8%), White (1.7%), or Two or More Races (2.8%). These statistics may reflect differing degrees of comfort with being out, access to transition support, and similar contextual factors across demographics.

Conclusion

Providing students with the ability to more completely reflect their identities in their college applications is a crucial step in ensuring that college leaders and support staff are aware of and able to support these students as they arrive on campus. Moreover, tracking and exploring trends in how students across the country identify themselves with respect to sex, gender, and pronouns offers unparalleled insights into these evolving and complex social dynamics.

We hope the findings summarized here facilitate useful conversations about the diversity of students applying to college. For those interested in more in-depth results, see Dr. Beemyn's peer-reviewed research article in the *International Journal of LGBTQ+ Youth Studies*.

Appendix

Glossary of trans and nonbinary terms included in this brief

For a more comprehensive list of LGBTQIA+ terms, refer to Dr. Beemyn's glossary here.

Agender people: Individuals who identify as not having a gender. Agender people may also identify as neutrois, genderless, or gender-neutral.

Bigender people: Individuals who experience their gender identity as two genders at the same time, or whose gender identity may vary between two genders.

Cis or cisgender people: Individuals who identify with the sex that was assigned to them at birth (i.e., people who are not trans).

Demigender people: Individuals who feel a partial connection to a particular gender identity. Examples of demigender identities include demigirl, demiboy, and demiandrogyne.

Genderfluid people: Individuals whose gender varies over time. A genderfluid person may at any time identify as male, female, genderless, or any nonbinary gender identity, or as some combination of gender identities. Some genderfluid individuals specify the genders they are fluid between (e.g., someone who is amascuafluid is fluid between agender and masculine genders, and someone who is afemmafluid is fluid between agender and masculine genders).

Genderqueer people: An umbrella term or a specific identity for individuals who identify as neither male nor female (but as another gender), as somewhere in between or beyond genders, or as a combination of genders.

Nonbinary people: An umbrella term or a specific identity for individuals who do not fit into traditional "male" and "female" gender categories. Nonbinary people include individuals who identify as **bigender**, **genderfluid**, **genderqueer**, **pangender**, and many additional genders.

Questioning people: Individuals who are uncertain about how they identify their gender and/or sexuality.

Trans people: An umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or expression is different from the sex assigned to them at birth. Among individuals who might identify as trans include **trans women**, **trans men**, and **nonbinary people**.

Transfeminine or transfem people or trans femmes: Individuals who were assigned male at birth who identify as feminine, but not necessarily as trans women.

Transmasculine or transmasc people: Individuals who were assigned female at birth who identify as masculine, but not necessarily as trans men.

Trans men: Men who were assigned female at birth. This term should be used instead of "transsexual men" or "FTMs," which are considered outdated.

Trans women: Women who were assigned male at birth. This term should be used instead of "transsexual women" or "MTFs," which are considered outdated.