

STATE-LEVEL COMMON APPLICATION POLICIES AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

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Abstract

Prospective college students—particularly students of color and those from low-income families—face a myriad of challenges applying to and enrolling in college, including constraints on information, financial aid, and academic preparation. Within the college search process alone, the number, diversity, and complexity of applications that students must complete represent substantial barriers to application and matriculation. A state-level common application seeks to reduce administrative barriers by allowing students to complete a single application to apply to multiple institutions. Using a difference-in-difference design that is robust to variation in treatment timing, we provide the first evidence on state-level enrollment impacts of these common applications. Despite the ongoing development and adoption of state common applications, we find no positive or negative effects on full-time equivalent enrollment in public higher education and show that the format of the common application (paper/online) does not matter. Rather, like strategies considered in other works, common applications may be most useful as a complement to more robust access and enrollment strategies. These findings should inform policy makers and serve as a foundation for future work examining the impacts of common applications on state and student outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Students face substantial challenges early in the college-going process, including the number, diversity, and complexity of applications they must complete to begin exploring their postsecondary options. Several states have sought to reduce administrative barriers and improve subsequent college enrollment by adopting a common application for undergraduate admissions. State common applications allow students to submit one application to multiple institutions, simplifying the application process while also saving students time and other resources (like multiple application fees), which reduces time and compliance costs. This study considers the effects of the adoption of a state-level common application, an increasingly popular, low-cost state policy tool, on enrollment in postsecondary education.

THE POLICY PROBLEM

The policy problem should be considered at both the student and state levels. At the student level, the college application process itself is not only structurally complex but is also rife with informational asymmetries (Klasik 2012; Odle, Delaney, and Magouirk 2023). These realities produce inequitable and inconsistent admissions results. Under admissions systems in which students must complete a unique application for each institution, students face large compliance costs, unclear and uneven information points, juggle various deadlines, attend to multiple application requirements, pay multiple application fees, and navigate barriers with various levels of social and cultural capital, which are particularly challenging for students from low-income families, students of color, and those who will be the first in their family to attend college (Dynarski et al. 2023).

At the state level, all states have a need for a more educated workforce to bolster economic growth. In response, many have pursued policies to increase access to higher education through, among other policies, targeted information mechanisms and broader access to financial aid (Dynarski et al. 2023; Dynarski, Page, and Scott-Clayton 2023). Despite these innovations, few states have managed to substantially and equitably reduce barriers to enrollment—as evidenced by persistent racial and socioeconomic gaps (Deming and Dynarski 2009; Baker, Klasik, and Reardon 2018)—or to improve state attainment rates as reflected by stagnant levels of completion (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2010; Denning et al. 2022). As of 2022, postsecondary attainment rates ranged from 42.7 percent of the working-age population in Nevada to 75.4 percent in the District of Columbia (Lumina Foundation 2024). Prior research has shown that state policy can be influential in shaping postsecondary opportunities for students, including students of color, those with lower academic preparation, and those from low-income families (Delaney 2014; Odle and Delaney 2022).

STATE-LEVEL COMMON APPLICATIONS

Conceptually, common applications should function to increase college enrollments. A common application allows students to use a single application to apply to multiple institutions, thereby reducing the intimidation and complexity of the application process and making it easier, faster, and simpler to apply to multiple colleges. This ease may not only increase applications on the extensive margin by increasing students' propensities to apply (among those who may not have considered college) but it may also increase

application behaviors on the intensive margin by allowing students to easily apply to multiple colleges (increasing the size of their application pool and subsequent opportunities). Statewide common applications may similarly increase students' propensities to stay in-state for college by increasing application ease for in-state institutions, and, when these applications are offered fee-free, access is also expected to increase among students from low-income households, given the removal of a financial barrier (Oreopoulos and Ford 2019; Delaney and Odle 2022).

Common applications also have the potential to help students overcome problems of self-selecting out of institutions that would be a good fit by exposing them to additional institutions that could offer important educational opportunities, grant better financial aid, or have lower net prices. The student search for college is both complex and imperfect (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Perna 2006). College search and choice processes have been shown to vary by race and ethnicity (Hurtado et al. 1997; Perna 2000), particularly for students with low "college knowledge," such as racially minoritized, low-income, rural, and first-generation students (Kao and Thompson 2003; Odle 2022). There is a substantial college choice literature that suggests that access can be enhanced by simplification to reduce search and choice barriers for students to enroll in college (Avery and Kane 2004; DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall 2006; Perna 2006).

Historically, common application systems have grown from state compliance with affirmative action rulings (e.g., Apply Texas was developed following the 1996 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Hopwood v. Texas*). However, more recent iterations of state-level common application systems have been derived from a policy focus on college enrollment and completion, as well as the development of state data systems that can functionally support a statewide application. While prior works have considered institutional adoptions of the Common App, a nearly uniform college application run by a nonprofit organization representing predominantly highly selective and private institutions, no cross-state study has considered the effect of state-level common applications on public postsecondary enrollments (Liu, Ehrenberg, and Mrdjenovic 2007; Knight and Schiff 2022).

A number of states have adopted a state-level common application for public institutions, including three states as recently as 2020. From a state perspective, when compared to other college access innovations like coaching, mentoring, bridge programs, or financial aid, common applications are low-cost policies that may support college enrollment. Table 1 provides information on states known to have a common application, including the implementation year and application format (i.e., paper, online, or both). At least twelve states have some form of a statewide common application, which may have begun as a common paper application that later moved online—or, for more recent adopters, an always-online application form. This also includes statewide participation among all public institutions using the private Common App. Some states have common applications for public university systems, like California (the University of California system) and Wisconsin (the Universities of Wisconsin system). Additionally, in Iowa, a state-developed common application was used for all three of the Regent campuses before moving these campuses to the private Common App. In Texas, the state has a single application used by all public four-year institutions in addition to a number of community colleges and private institutions, encompassing fifty-seven institutions

Table 1. States with Common Applications, Including Implementation Year by Application Format

State	Paper	Online
California	1985	1996
Hawaii	1975	2009
Idaho	1990	2017
Illinois	—	2020
Iowa	—	2011
Maine	1995	2015
Minnesota	—	2006
Montana	—	2020
Nebraska	—	2020
New York	1996	2008
Texas	1998	2005
Wisconsin	1969	1997

Source: SHEEO (2022); Research team policy and website scans.

Notes: Table reports states with a known statewide common application and the year of implementation for its paper and/or online version.

in total. Although these features vary, what unifies all of these states is the existence of a state common application that streamlines the pathway to apply to college.

EXISTING RESEARCH ABOUT STATE-LEVEL COMMON APPLICATIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Studies of the private Common App at private four-year institutions showed a 5.7 to 7.0 percent increase in applications, as well as increases in the percentage of enrolled students, but these findings were also accompanied by decreased yield rates, presumably because students were admitted to more or other institutions by way of the Common App (Liu, Ehrenberg, and Mrdjenovic 2007). Recent evidence also suggests that institutions that adopted the Common App attracted more out-of-state students and enjoyed higher average SAT scores of entering cohorts (Knight and Schiff 2022). While the private, nonprofit Common App is distinct from statewide common applications, these studies (which have also only focused on private four-year institutions) still offer insight into the impact of reducing administrative burdens related to college applications that we would also expect with public institutions. However, no research has yet considered the effect of state-level common applications on increasing enrollment. One unpublished dissertation examining Apply Texas showed that elements of the form were helpful to institutions in predicting student performance, degree progress, and persistence in college (Murphy 2010), but did not consider its role in reducing barriers to college application or enrollment from the student perspective.

Despite the lack of evidence on common applications specifically, simplifying the college admissions process in other ways has been shown to benefit students, particularly for those from low-income families. More than half (53 percent) of high-achieving students from low-income households do not apply to a selective institution (Hoxby and Avery 2013). In fact, only 8 percent apply in a manner like their higher income peers. Current widely used college admissions policies—like admissions staff

recruiting, campus visits, and college access programs—are ineffective at attracting and enrolling these students in part because they are poorly targeted but also because they do not fully address the informational and compliance barriers these students face (Hoxby and Avery 2013). A universal intervention, however, like a common application that eliminates barriers to application and enrollment is likely to be impactful across student populations—not only among high-achieving, low-income groups.

We rely on the theory of administrative burden from the public administration and political science fields as our conceptual framework. “A simple definition of administrative burden is that it is an individual’s experience of a policy’s implementation as onerous. A more specific definition is that administrative burdens are the learning, psychological, and compliance costs that citizens experience in their interactions with government” (Herd and Moynihan 2019, p. 22). While developed as a theory of citizen interaction with governments, it is applicable to college applications at public institutions since these institutions rely on public funding and are, in most cases, part of state governments. The theory of administrative burden has been used in previous higher education literature on related topics. For example, administrative burdens have been shown to discourage uptake with means-tested programs, such as need-based student financial aid (Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2006; Bettinger et al. 2012; Dynarski and Wiederspan 2012; Scott-Clayton 2013; Dynarski et al. 2021; Burland et al. 2023). Additionally, other interventions that reduce administrative burden, provide behavioral interventions to “nudge” students toward completing administrative tasks, or simplify the pathway to college have been tested on pre-enrollment processes (Castleman and Page 2015, 2016; Page and Gehlbach 2017), college applications and application fee waivers (Hoxby and Turner 2013), the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (Castleman and Page 2016; Page, Castleman, and Meyer 2020; Bird et al. 2021), and student loans (Barr, Bird, and Castleman 2021; Darolia and Harper 2018; Marx and Turner 2018, 2019; Rosinger 2017, 2019). These collectively show that reducing burden increases take-up and later intended outcomes.

All three types of burdens outlined in the administrative burden framework apply to the college application process: learning, compliance, and psychological costs (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Reducing these burdens is important because the application process produces inequities such that those with the most disadvantage are the least likely to overcome an application barrier (Herd and Moynihan 2019; Rosinger, Meyer, and Wang 2021; Burland et al. 2023). State common applications reduce learning costs related to determining eligibility and learning about the application process. Students need to use only one application to apply to multiple colleges in states with common applications, whereas in other states, prospective students must learn about campus options, eligibility requirements, and application processes for each institution. In addition, students may not be aware of all of the campuses in a state or system, so applying to one institution with a statewide common application will increase awareness and provide information about additional campus options. Compliance costs are also reduced with statewide common applications since most application elements only need to be entered once. In addition, through a more direct financial benefit, most states offer automatic application fee waivers as part of a common application. The University of California system is an exception, requiring an application fee for each campus where a student applies. Psychological costs are also reduced with state common

applications since the stigma of sharing personal and academic information (grade point average, standardized test scores, etc.) is faced only once. In addition, students' fear of rejection may be minimized for each additional college added within a common application system. Likewise, common applications should reduce administrative burdens for states and institutions by minimizing the number of forms and websites needed for students to apply to college.

When an administrative burden is removed universally for all students in a single state, we anticipate the impact of the policy change to influence college choices for all students and expect to see net changes in enrollment behavior with more students attending college. We seek to address a critical gap in the literature on state policy and college admissions by asking the research question: *Did the adoption of a state-level college application increase full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment in public higher education?*

DATA

Our data come from the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO). To identify states with common applications, we leverage the 2022 SHEEO *Common College Admission Application Survey*, which captures states with a common application, their year of implementation, and information on their modality (e.g., paper versus online). We then supplement these records with extensive research team scans of state coordinating/governing board websites, institutional websites, press releases, policy briefs, and outreach to state contacts. Our primary outcome of interest (FTE enrollment) also comes from SHEEO in its 2021 *State Higher Education Finance* survey, which captures state FTE enrollment at the state-by-year level for all fifty states. FTE enrollment is computed by SHEEO by collecting the aggregate number of enrolled credit hours by state and scaling these figures by twelve credit hours to arrive at a comparable number of full-time, academic year students (excluding medical school enrollments) across states. Our unique state-by-year dataset spans academic years 1979–80 to 2020–21, captures statewide FTE enrollment in each year, and identifies the year(s) of statewide common application implementation for adopting states.

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

Given our ability to observe enrollment outcomes for states before and after the adoption of a common application, a traditional difference-in-differences (DID) design is appropriate. This method allows us to compare outcomes for common application states to a nontreated comparison group before and after adoption. However, our analytic sample includes states that adopted common applications in different years, and recent work in econometrics has shown that the canonical two-way fixed effects estimator may be biased in the presence of differential treatment timing by way of making “bad” comparisons between newly treated units and already-treated units (Goodman-Bacon 2021). Given this concern, we leverage a new advance in the DID literature: the Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021) doubly robust DID design, which eliminates concerns of bias from multiple treatment time periods by estimating group–time average treatment effects, the aggregate of all “good” comparisons between newly treated units (in their respective period) and never-treated units. This method has been increasingly adopted in applied education policy research (e.g., Odle, Bae, and González Canché 2023). We provide a more complete explanation of our empirical strategy in the supplemental material,

Table 2. Impacts of State-Level Common Applications on Statewide FTE Enrollment by Common Application Format

	Any Common Application	Paper Application	Online Application	Paper to Online Application
Implementation of Common Application	0.0211 (0.0184)	0.0283 (0.0240)	0.0023 (0.0195)	0.0161 (0.0181)
N	2,100	1,118	1,333	1,395

Source: Authors' calculations from SHEEO (2021).

Notes: The table reports coefficients and state-level cluster-robust standard errors (in parentheses). Each model is estimated using the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) doubly robust difference-in-differences (DID) estimator and includes state and year fixed effects for academic years 1979–80 to 2020–21. The outcome is the natural log of statewide full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment. "Any Common Application" compares any (first) common application adoption (paper or online) to never-adopters. "Paper Application" compares any (first) paper common application adoption to never-adopters (excluding future online adopters). "Online Application" compares any (first) online common application adoption to never-adopters (excluding prior paper adopters). "Paper to Online Application" compares the adoption of an online application (from existing paper application) to never-adopters. Panels are restricted to ± 6 pre-/post-treatment years.

available in a separate online appendix that can be accessed on *Education Finance and Policy's* website at https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00439.

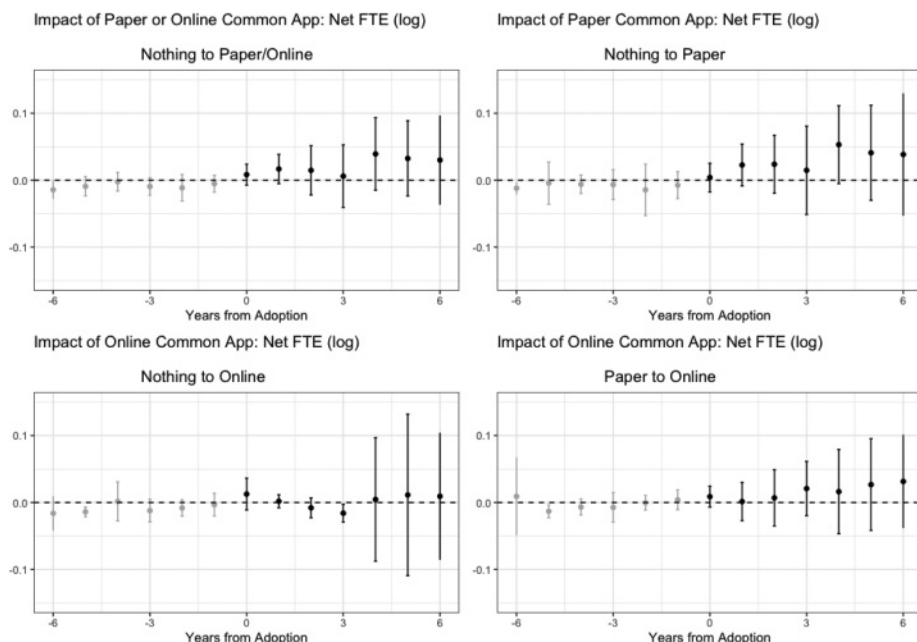
RESULTS

Table 2 presents estimated impacts of common applications on FTE enrollment in public institutions. Generally, we do not find significant effects on enrollment following the adoption of any form of a statewide common application (i.e., paper or online). Estimates descriptively suggest potential increases of 1.6 to 2.8 percent in FTE enrollment following adoption, but none are statistically significant—and it is important to note that our state-level models make our estimates relatively imprecise. We did not find a significant effect following the adoption of a paper application or an online application. Furthermore, movement from a paper to online common application was also insignificant.

Figure 1 presents event study estimates associated with these comparisons. Overall, there is little change in FTE enrollment following the adoption of any form of common application. All estimates remain closely clustered around zero. FTE enrollment levels between states without a common application and those with any type of common application (upper left quadrant) appear to diverge in years following adoption, but these changes are small and not separable from zero. This pattern appears driven by descriptive increases in FTE enrollment levels that follows the advent of a paper application (i.e., shown in the top right quadrant), where differences between states with paper common applications and states without any common applications diverge unlike in states that only adopt an online application (lower left quadrant). However, our estimates are not precise enough to make any claims of meaningful positive or negative effects. In all, we do not find that the adoption of a state common increased (or decreased) college enrollment levels.

DISCUSSION

Using recent advances in DID methods and a unique longitudinal dataset across states, we do not find evidence that suggests the launch of a state-level common application



Source: Authors' calculations from SHEEO (2021).

Notes: Figures plot group-time average treatment effect point estimates at different lengths of exposure, bounded by 95% confidence intervals. The x-axis represents years from statewide common application adoption. Plots produced via the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) difference-in-differences (DID) estimator.

Figure 1. Event Study Figures for Impacts of State-Level Common Applications on Statewide Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Enrollment by Common Application Format

had an effect on FTE enrollment in public institutions. Our overall estimate allows us to reject any meaningfully negative impacts of a common application and to rule out any impacts larger than 6 percent. In addition, we do not find significant effects based on the format of the common application—paper or online. Our inconclusive findings do not support a recommendation for additional states to adopt a common application. Likewise, they also do not suggest that states or systems currently operating a common application should consider discontinuing the practice.

Our findings are less suggestive of strong effects of a statewide common application on enrollment behavior compared to prior work (Knight and Shiff 2022), but several features may explain the differences in our estimates of effects. Knight and Shiff (2022) found positive enrollment effects for out-of-state students who used the private, non-profit Common App. Their finding of an effect only for out-of-state students possibly reflects how the private Common App exposes students to additional postsecondary opportunities outside of their home state, whereas our insignificant effects are perhaps a result of the narrower scope of state-based common applications that are limited to institutions within state or system boundaries. Historically, the Common App was used by elite private institutions and attracted student applicants that were both wealthier and had higher academic achievement than most students applying to public institutions (and public institutions are the dominant institutional type among campuses included in state-level common applications). The population of students on the private Common App are already highly likely to enroll in college without any intervention

(e.g., Odle and Delaney 2023), so the two types of common applications may be capturing different student populations with more privileged students responding to the increased choice provided by the private Common App and students using statewide common applications more for access. This is further compounded by the reality that the Common App simplifies access to highly selective, sought-after institutions, while statewide common applications theoretically simplify access to less in-demand campuses, suggesting any effect of statewide common applications would be expected to be smaller in magnitude than the private Common App. In addition, the Common App has seen remarkable growth and in recent years has started to reach more diverse students from a broader range of academic achievement profiles. It is possible that the success and scope of the private sector Common App overshadowed the effects of state-level common applications and is an alternative explanation for our results. This has also been seen more recently (since the end date of our dataset) with more states using private market partners to implement state-level common applications, such as the partnership between Connecticut and the Common App (Bauer-Wolf 2023a).

Our work is the first to causally estimate the impact of a state-level common application on enrollment in public institutions of higher education. Considering results across all types of state-level common applications, our work suggests that statewide common applications do not discourage enrollment but are also not sufficient to meaningfully address growing state and institutional enrollment and attainment concerns (see, for instance, Knox 2022). Our results regarding state-level FTE enrollment in public institutions offer estimates that are likely downwardly biased in states where common applications did not apply to all public institutions, rather, only to a subset. In addition, the size of the state does not seem influential since both populous states (California, Illinois, New York, and Texas) and states with smaller populations were part of our treatment group. Conceptually, a common application may reduce administrative burdens by making it easier for students to apply to multiple campuses. However, common applications may be most effective in increasing enrollment when paired with other college access strategies, such as proactive admissions policies like direct admissions (Delaney and Odle 2022; Odle and Delaney 2022) and cascading admissions (Bauer-Wolf 2023b), or robust need-based financial aid programs (Gurantz and Odle 2022; Dynarski, Page, and Scott-Clayton 2023). None of these strategies are a panacea alone, but, when combined, may increase impacts on enrollment (Odle 2023).

To increase the precision of these estimates, future research should leverage institution-level data to isolate true treatment-on-the-treated estimates for the specific campuses that participate in each state-level common application. In addition, future research should consider the impact of common applications on both application and enrollment behavior. Future research should also explore how institutional factors may moderate the effects of a state-level common application (e.g., selectivity, faculty–student ratio, expenditures on scholarships and fellowships), as well as any heterogeneous effects that could be observed for institutions who participate in both a statewide common application and the private Common App. Additionally, future studies could also leverage student-level data to examine whether a state-level common application increased the level (community college or four-year institution), type (public or private), selectivity, or number of institutions to which students applied. Disaggregating the data at the student level could also yield analyses for historically marginalized groups by

enabling subgroup analyses by gender, race, and income. Likewise, future work should consider if common applications increase in-state enrollments (or, reduce out-of-state migration) and seek to understand if a state-level common application affects infra-marginal students' decisions to apply to or enroll in college. These studies could also consider the role of a common application in improving student–institution match or rely on qualitative work to understand the mechanisms through which these policies shape behaviors at the individual and family levels.

Overall, our study provides the first evidence to suggest that the introduction of a state-level common application does not decrease public FTE enrollment levels in a state, but that this intervention also does not appear to be enough as a stand-alone tool to significantly increase enrollments. In this light, policy makers may consider a common application as a low-cost policy to reduce the administrative burden of applying to college, but not as a policy mechanism to increase enrollments.

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