

Equity innovations guide

May 2024



Dear friends,

I'm excited to share with you our first equity innovations guide, which highlights equity-focused pilots, projects, and initiatives that are changing the postsecondary and admissions landscape.

Inspired by the latest technology of the time — the photocopier — a group of colleges and universities came together in 1975 to streamline the college application process by creating a common application form. The goal was to make the application process simpler for students and to broaden the pool of prospective applicants.

Over the last decade alone, Common App has made huge strides in expanding access for students pursuing postsecondary opportunities. Since 2019, low-income applicants have increased at nearly three times the rate of higher-income applicants but are still significantly underrepresented in our pool.

In 2023, we tapped into the spirit of that small group of colleges in 1975 to explore what we can do now—almost 50 years later—to expand our college and university members' reach and serve more first-generation and low- and middle-income students. In September 2023, Common App officially launched its Next Chapter.

Our Next Chapter is not so different from what our founders imagined in 1975. We're working with members, counselors, and other key partners to reach our moonshot goal to close our equity gap in students pursuing postsecondary opportunities. To close the gap, Common App needs 650,000 additional applicants from low- and middle-income communities by 2030.

To reach this goal, it will take new and innovative strategies to close our equity gaps. We also need to forge new partnerships to meet students where they are.

Our Equity Innovations Guide provides an annual opportunity to update you on the progress of these key initiatives. We will highlight promising pilots and practices happening at our member institutions, in high schools, and by partner organizations that help all students connect to postsecondary opportunities.

Warmly,

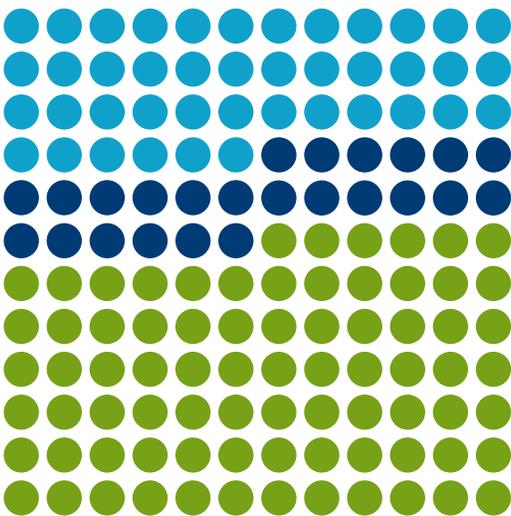
Jenny Rickard
President & CEO
Common App



Common App and its Next Chapter

A group of colleges and universities came together in 1975 to streamline the college application process by creating a common application form for students. Nearly 50 years later, Common App continues to open doors to opportunity.

Common App's 2022–2023 membership and reach



Each dot ○ represents 10K below median-income students

Common App has set a bold goal to focus its work in the Next Chapter

We call it our moonshot. By 2030, Common App will close its equity gap in students pursuing postsecondary opportunities.

In 2021, we had 350K below-median income students. Without this refocused commitment to our mission, we will only reach an additional 200k below-median income students by 2030. **Through our Next Chapter innovations and initiatives, we're aiming to reach an additional 650K low- and middle-income students.**

- 350K below-median income students in 2021
- 200K projected increase on current growth trajectory
- 650K additional needed to reach our moonshot by 2030

Reimagining college admissions to be more simple, logical, joyful, and equitable

Common App strives to be a trusted resource for our member colleges, students, families, and the people who support students navigating the application process. Together, we can advance equity for students from low- and middle-income communities and help all students access, afford, and attain opportunity. We have several initiatives in flight that will help us reach our moonshot.

Pilots and initiatives

Direct admissions

Student context pilot

Direct admissions

What it is

Direct admissions is designed to bridge the gap between high school and higher education by proactively admitting students into college. Common App’s program identifies first-generation and middle- and low-income students who meet the admissions requirements of participating institutions and informs those students that they have been conditionally accepted to a given institution based on their qualifications.

What we’ve seen so far

Pilot 1

3 participating colleges

3,300 students
across 3 states

66 students applied

Pilot 2

6 participating colleges

18,000 students
across 4 states

830 students applied

Pilot 3

13 participating colleges

33,000 students
across 6 states

1,070 students applied

Among the three pilots, the results were the same:

- Students who receive direct admission offers are more likely to apply to the college offering them direct admission than those who do not receive direct admissions offers.
- Strong evidence that impacts were strongest for Black or African American and Latinx students, and students from below-median income ZIP codes.
- Students gained confidence as a result of their direct admission offer, regardless of whether they acted on them. We also found that students felt they had more choices in the college application process.

Bringing the program to scale

Common App launched its full-scale direct admissions program with 71 member colleges and universities in the fall of 2023. Over 400,000 first-generation and low and middle-income students across 28 states received proactive admissions offers.

Common App Direct Admissions also included outreach and resources to families and counselors with students receiving direct admissions offers. Early insights show that 3 out of 4 students who added a school to their college list upon receiving a direct admission offer applied to that school.

“I honestly felt some relief because it felt as though a lot of my accomplishments in high school weren’t fully worth it. ... [T]his showed me that I am somewhat prepared for my future.”

— Common App direct admissions offer recipient

Student context pilot

What it is

In partnership with Making Caring Common, a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we created a Student Context Inventory that gives students the option to tell us more about their circumstances and responsibilities in a checklist-style section of the application. This checklist allows students to think more broadly about the valuable experience they bring to the table, while also providing Common App members the ability to evaluate a student's academic record in a broader context. This signals to students that their lived experiences matter.

Students can include items like:

- Spending more than a certain number of hours a week working at a paid job to support their family
- Interpreting or translating for household members
- Taking care of their siblings

What we've seen so far

We first piloted this question in the 2022–2023 application season with 12 member colleges. Of all applicants on the Common App platform, 17% encountered the question on a participating member's supplemental screen. Our findings so far indicate that most students are willing to engage with the optional student context inventory question, and the question response options are strongly related to common indicators of socioeconomic and first-generation status.

65%

of students opted to respond to the question

28%

of respondents selected four or more activities

Context & Background

Sometimes academic records and extracurricular activities are impacted by family responsibilities or other circumstances. We would like to know about these responsibilities and circumstances. Your responses will not negatively impact your application. You may repeat some information you already provided in the Common App Activities section.

Please select which activities you spend **4 or more hours** per week doing.

- Assisting family or household members with situations such as doctors appointments, bank visits, or visa interviews
- Doing tasks for my family or household (cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc.)
- Experiencing homelessness or another unstable living situation
- Interpreting or translating for family or household members
- Living in an environment without reliable or usable internet
- Living independently or living on my own (not including boarding school)
- Managing family or household finances, budget, or paying bills
- Providing transportation for family or household members
- Taking care of sick, disabled, and/or elderly members of my family or household
- Taking care of younger family or household members
- Taking care of my own child or children
- Working at a paid job to contribute to my household's income
- Yard work/farm work
- Other (please describe)
- None of these

[Continue](#)

What's next

In its second year, we partnered with 23 member colleges for this pilot initiative. We'll have updated results to share in Summer 2024.

Applicants who selected seven or more response options were about **3.9x** as likely as non-responders to report low-income status.

Connect students to financial aid resources, information, and opportunities

Pilots and initiatives

Scholarship America partnership

FAFSA advising



FAFSA resources

What it is

Common App provided resources to support students, families, and counselors through the rollout of the new 24–25 FAFSA, also known as the Better FAFSA. We partnered with the nonprofit Benefits Data Trust to spread the word about their AI-powered digital FAFSA advisor, Wyatt, which can answer student questions about FAFSA via text 24/7.



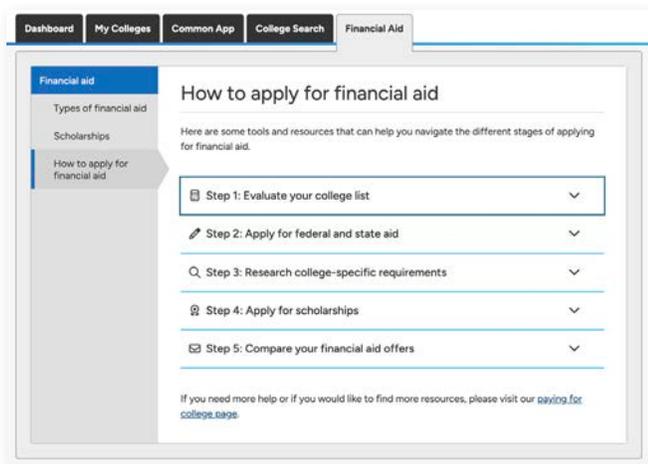
Beginning in October, we reached out to first-year and transfer students via social media to build awareness of the new FAFSA process and connect them to Wyatt. Following the official FAFSA launch in December, we delivered a targeted email to students and counselors to alert them of our Paying for College website resources and support. Our counselor newsletter alerted counselors and advisors to the availability of these resources to support their students. We also shared reminders and resources through our social channels, from nudges to create a FSA ID to FAFSA checklists.

3.9M

total emails sent

44%

open rate



We've updated our in-app resources and Paying for College page. Students and families can now access Better FAFSA resources on our Paying for College Page, on the Financial Aid tab of the first-year application, and the Help Center of the transfer application.

Financial aid webinars

In partnership with uAspire, we offered three webinars this spring focused on:

- Completing the 2024–2025 FAFSA
- Financial Aid Offer Review
- Affording College 101



Watch these webinars and more on Common App's YouTube channel

Scholarship America partnership



What it is

In 2021, Common App partnered with Scholarship America, the largest administrator of private scholarships in the country, with a goal of connecting underrepresented students to scholarship opportunities to fund their post-secondary pathways. Over 3 years later, our partnership has shown promising results. This year, we piloted a new scholarship matching feature on the financial aid tab of the application, which drove high student engagement.

What we've seen so far

In the third iteration of this pilot:

70K+

racially underrepresented and fee waiver eligible students reached

\$350K+

awarded to underrepresented students due to Common App outreach

Common App outreach drove an:

11%

increase in Black, Latino, and Indigenous applicants to participating scholarship programs

16%

increase in first generation applicants

What's next

In the 2024–2025 application season, we'll continue notifying students directly in the application of scholarship opportunities they may be eligible to receive.

Leveraging our data and research to be a voice for equity in the admissions process

Common App's data provides even more rocket fuel to help us reach the moon.

We use our data and conduct research to shine light on promising practices and opportunities and to raise awareness of barriers in the college application process for underrepresented students — all in real time. These insights help Common App, our member colleges and universities, counselors, and others do more to support students on their way to postsecondary success.

Research products

First-generation briefs

Transfer brief

Read the reports in full

Common App's research briefs are publicly available at commonapp.org/about/reports-and-insights



First-generation briefs

What it is

Common App's first research brief of the 2023–2024 application season took a deep dive into nearly a decade of application data for over 9 million applicants to analyze first-generation status, parental education, and related student characteristics. The analysis highlights who can be considered a first-generation college student and how best to think about and address their needs as a population.

First-generation status in context • Part 1

Trends in parental education & family structures over time

Whose degrees — and which degrees — matter for defining first-generation status?

- While there are many ways to approach defining first-generation status, many organizations (Common App included) use the 1998 Higher Education Act Amendments definition. This definition focuses on a student's parents and explicit bachelor's degree attainment rather than associate degree attainment or college attendance.
- Common App data show that small details — specifically which parents' degrees and what types of degrees are considered — can have a big impact on which students are included in first-generation definitions.
- When building programs and policies, colleges and other organizations should be clear about who they are trying to identify with the phrase "first-generation" and why.

Looking at applicants in the 2022 season:

- 30.4%** report not living in a household with both parents.
- 11.6%** report having limited information about one or more parents.
- 8.8%** have parents who obtained a bachelor's, but from a country outside the U.S.
- 29.7%** of students whose parents didn't obtain a bachelor's still attended some college.

Questions to consider:

- When should the focus be on parents versus caregivers more generally?
- What's the best way to handle uncertainty about a student's parents?
- How important is a parent's familiarity with higher education in the U.S. context, specifically?
- In what circumstances could a parent's experience attending college at all be relevant?

part one: family

in the college i of the Common App e to lean on colleges c mobility and gily crucial to ask: ns are accessible to or no college

ents has become an prily across the widely in terms of who I first-generation e actual accessibility if your parents 'bachelor's degree, y completed a institution outside of 's degrees? What if a contact with them

in defining this reover reveal ent to which people and for other je in our society. Such dents themselves ation status when

commonapp.org/about/reports-and-insights

First-generation status in context • Part 2

Differing definitions and their implications

How do different definitions of first-generation change who is considered a part of this population?

There are over 100 distinct definitions of first-generation status that can be constructed based on different parental characteristics and details. Each definition creates a different number of first-generation students with different levels of college-readiness and application behaviors. Depending on the exact definition for first-generation status used, the number of first-generation applicants on the Common App in 2022 can vary from 304,338 to 709,850.

How does the number of first-gen applicants change with the definition used?

Definition	First-generation	Continuing-generation
No Bachelor's, Parents*	~600K	~100K
No Bachelor's, Living Parents	~550K	~100K
No Bachelor's, Caregivers	~500K	~100K
No Domestic Bachelor's, Caregivers	~450K	~100K
No Long-standing Domestic Bachelor's, Caregivers	~400K	~100K
No Associate, Parents	~350K	~100K
No Attendance, Parents	~300K	~100K
No Dual Bachelor's, Parents	~250K	~100K
*Current definition	~304,338	~405,512

Student characteristics vary based on the chosen definition:

Living in a below-median income ZIP code: While 30% of all applicants are from below-median income ZIP codes, the percentage of continuing-gen students from those ZIP codes can range from 16% to 24%, and from 40% to 49% for first-gen students.

Fee-waiver eligibility: While 33% of all applicants are fee-waiver eligible, it can vary for continuing-gen students, ranging from 8% to 20% — more than doubling. For first-gen students, it swings between 48% and 62%.

Underrepresented Minority applicants (URM): While 29% of all applicants are URM, the percentage of continuing-gen students who are URM can range from 16% to 24%, and from 45% to 58% for first-gen students.

commonapp.org/about/reports-and-insights

First-generation status in context • Part 3

Exploring the complexities of detailed parental education

What more can we learn about first-generation students when we look directly at both parents' degrees?

In previous research, we showed that definitions of first-generation status had implications on student population size, college readiness and application behavior. In this brief, we go one step further by looking at specific parent educational attainment.

Average GPA by first-generation status and definition

First-generation average

- Parent 1: Associate, Parent 2: Associate: 3.50
- Parent 1: Did not attend, No other parent: 3.62
- Parent 1: Did not attend, No other parent: 3.37

Continuing-generation average

- Parent 1: Doctorate, Parent 2: Doctorate: 3.74
- Parent 1: Doctorate, Parent 2: Doctorate: 3.92
- Parent 1: Bachelor's, Parent 2: Did not attend: 3.60

Consider these two students: one student has a single parent who never attended college. The other student has two parents who each obtained an associate degree. Both are generally considered first-generation, yet these groups of students differ in terms of academic preparation like GPA. We see similar variations with continuing-generation students as well.

Action plan:

- Test your definition of first-gen students. What does your data say?
- Be deliberate in how you define first-gen students. Is your definition aligned with your goals and student needs?
- Be transparent about this definition. It has meaningful implications on students' self-identity and understanding.

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Transfer brief

What it is

A longitudinal study of applicants on Common App's transfer platform. Most applicants on Common App's transfer platform are from traditionally well-served populations (one-quarter were underrepresented minority students, one-third were first-generation students, and just 6% were from low-income households) and are typically transferring from a four-year university or a high-transfer traditional community college.



Common App for transfer: a four-year retrospective

April 24, 2023

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Introduction

Transfer application data, unlike first-year application data, has been largely unavailable to the public. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) does not collect information on application behavior among incoming non-first-time students, and the College Scorecard lacks statistics on transfer application behavior. Only the voluntary Common Data Set (CDS)¹ collects institutional data on transfer applications, and the challenge of aggregating these data makes national-level analysis prohibitively difficult. The lack of systematic and timely data on the application process for transfer students has left gaps in our understanding, making it difficult to identify barriers that may exist for these applicants.

Therefore, the Common App data and insights described herein are largely novel. We provide four-year aggregated trends on one of the first nationwide datasets on transfer applications to institutions primarily in the United States. Our analysis reveals that the majority of applicants on the transfer platform were from traditionally well-served populations. These findings are somewhat concerning given that the college transfer process should reflect educational mobility for all students, especially for historically excluded groups.

¹ Institutions summarize application data via the [Common Data Set \(CDS\)](#); however, a central repository for aggregated data does not exist.

Meeting students where they are: Forging new partnerships

To reach our moonshot goal, we need to meet students where they are and inspire them to consider postsecondary opportunities. One of the most effective ways to do that is through our state-level partnerships. We have several partnerships in flight that are helping us gain valuable insights into how we can expand access to postsecondary opportunities.

Partnerships

Illinois Board of Higher Education

Connecticut State Colleges & Universities

Research collaborations

Illinois Board of Higher Education

In 2021, all of the public universities in Illinois joined the platform as part of a state effort to increase college access and close equity gaps led by Governor JB Pritzker. The addition of all of the public universities made Illinois the first state in the nation to lead a coordinated effort that will enable students to apply to all public four-year institutions in the state through the Common App.



Since then, Common App and the state of Illinois have partnered to provide in-depth data analyses that help stakeholders see what's happening across the state in terms of student behavior.

Connecticut State Colleges & Universities

In the Fall of 2023, we announced our partnership with the state of Connecticut through the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) to offer thousands of students in the state direct admissions to both public and private institutions through their Connecticut Automatic Admissions Program (CAAP). Connecticut high school seniors who meet identified thresholds are eligible to be automatically admitted to participating colleges and universities.



Through April 15, 2024

2.7K

unique students received a CAAP offer from the 8 participating institutions

21.6K

total offers provided to students

5.1K

total applications

Research collaborations

Trends and disparities in extracurricular activity reporting

In collaboration with researchers at University of Maryland, we found that White applicants reported an average of nearly 47% more activities than Black applicants; continuing-generation applicants reported an average of almost 37% more than first-generation applicants; and fee waiver non-recipients reported an average of 35% more than fee waiver recipients.

Research summary: trends and disparities in extracurricular activity reporting

April 18, 2023

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Introduction

Each year, hundreds of thousands of students use the Common App to apply to colleges and universities across the United States. While they can describe and distinguish themselves in a variety of ways on the application, extracurricular activities are a particularly salient option for applicants to showcase their talents, passions, and individual accomplishments.

Even so, we currently know little about the landscape of extracurricular participation among our applicants, to include insight into how applicants describe their extracurricular involvement – what kinds of accolades do they describe? And what types of leadership positions do they report?

These questions are of particular importance to explore through a lens of equity as (a) many institutions remain test-optional and are poised to shift that focus to other components of the application, and (b) the existence of well-documented financial, cultural, and logistical barriers across many extracurriculars (e.g., cost of equipment, lessons, travel, etc.). To what extent might consideration of extracurriculars advantage some demographic groups over others?

In this brief, we summarize the findings of an academic research collaboration between scholars at University of Maryland,

SCIENCE ADVANCES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIAL SCIENCES

Using artificial intelligence to assess personal qualities in college admissions

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Personal qualities like prosocial purpose and leadership predict important life outcomes, including college success. Unfortunately, the holistic assessment of personal qualities in college admissions is opaque and resource intensive. Can artificial intelligence (AI) advance the goals of holistic admissions? While cost-effective, AI has been criticized as a “black box” that may inadvertently penalize already disadvantaged subgroups when used in high-stakes settings. Here, we consider an AI approach to assessing personal qualities that aims to overcome these limitations. Research assistants and admissions officers first identified the presence/absence of seven personal qualities in $n = 3131$ applicant essays describing extracurricular and work experiences. Next, we fine-tuned pretrained language models with these ratings, which successfully reproduced human codes across demographic subgroups. Last, in a national sample ($N = 305,594$), computer-generated scores collectively demonstrated incremental validity for predicting 6-year college graduation. We discuss challenges and opportunities of AI for assessing personal qualities.

INTRODUCTION

Many colleges embrace the ideals of holistic review. In a recent survey by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 70% of admissions officers said that they consider personal qualities to be an important factor when selecting applicants (1). This aim is justified by longitudinal research affirming that personal qualities, whether referred to as “noncognitive skills,” “social-emotional competencies,” “personality,” or “character,” predict positive life outcomes in general and success in college in particular (2–5). Moreover, a holistic admissions process can advance equity, some argue, as applicants are able to demonstrate qualifications not reflected in their standardized test scores, which tend to be highly correlated with socioeconomic advantage (6). However, history shows that equity is certainly not guaranteed by holistic review. A century ago, the Columbia University first began requiring applicants to write a personal essay, which admissions officers evaluated for evidence of “good character” (7). Previously, the university’s admissions decisions had been based primarily on standardized test scores. The result was a growing proportion of Jewish students in each entering class, which in turn led to concerns that, as Columbia’s dean at the time put it, the campus was no longer welcoming to “students who come from homes of refinement” (p. 87). It has been argued that for Columbia and other Ivy League colleges that era required the justification, explanation, or even disclosure of these summary character judgments enabled the unfair exclusion of qualified Jewish applicants. Although its aims may be nobler today, the holistic review process itself remains much the same: admissions officers still rely heavily on the personal essay to evaluate an applicant’s personal qualities (1). The particulars of how, or even which, personal qualities are assessed, remain undisclosed to either applicants or the

public, and even the “admissions officers themselves simply do not have a common definition of holistic review beyond ‘reading the entire file’” (8). As one admissions officer put it, the status quo of holistic review is both “opaque and secretive” (9). Recently, a more transparent and systematic process has been recommended for the holistic review of personal qualities in college admissions. Specifically, admissions officers have been urged to assess individual personal qualities separately (as opposed to making a summary judgment of good character), to use structured rubrics (as opposed to intuition), and to carry out multiple, independent evaluations (as opposed to relying on a single officer’s judgment) (6, 10). Such recommendations represent the application of basic psychometric principles and, in research contexts, have long been used to increase the reliability, validity, and interpretability of human ratings (11, 12). Moreover, the transparency of this systematic approach should limit bias, whether accidental or intentional.

In college admissions, however, this ideal is hardly ever achieved. The soaring number of applications that admissions officers must review, which for the majority of colleges has more than doubled in the last two decades, allows extraordinarily limited time to review each one (13, 14). These logistical and budgetary constraints are likely to continue to prohibit the implementation of best practices that, were resources unlimited, could optimize reliability, validity, interpretability, and in turn, equity.

Can artificial intelligence (AI) advance the aims of holistic review? With stunning efficiency, AI systems identify patterns in data and, with stunning fidelity, apply learned models to new cases. For example, a computer algorithm could be trained to generate personal quality scores from student writing instantaneously, reliably, and at near-zero marginal cost. However, there are concerns that the “black box” of an AI algorithm may inadvertently perpetuate, or even exacerbate, bias against disadvantaged subgroups (15, 16). Such bias has been shown in the domains of hiring, criminal justice, and medical diagnosis (17–19). In college admissions, AI-quantified essay content and style have been shown to correlate

Used these fine-tuned models to assess personal qualities in college admissions.

Results found evidence that AI scores were valid, interpretable, and were not dependent on applicants’ backgrounds, highlighting the potential of AI as an added tool in the admission officer’s toolbox.

Used separate models for each quality.

AI to identify the best personal qualities scores. As a measure of validity, we used human ratings for leadership and “captain” roles.

Used to this “your key”.

we

of about

pretrained

quality scores

Work with Angela Duckworth, Benjamin Lira, and coauthors on AI essay reading

The researchers piloted a novel application of AI to measure applicants’ personal qualities like leadership, perseverance, and teamwork. The resulting scores were valid, interpretable, and were not dependent on applicants’ backgrounds, highlighting the potential of AI as an added tool in the admission officer’s toolbox.

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This innovative work would not have been possible without the more than \$11 million in grant funding we've received throughout the last few years. We are grateful to our partners for helping us continue increasing access for underrepresented students and helping them overcome barriers to college.



We're so excited to share more about Common App's Next Chapter with you. For more information, visit commonapp.org/about/next-chapter

