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

1.4M
students

8.6M
applications submitted

1,000+
colleges
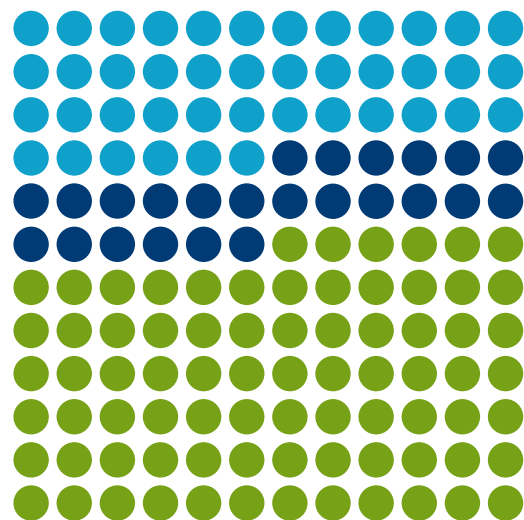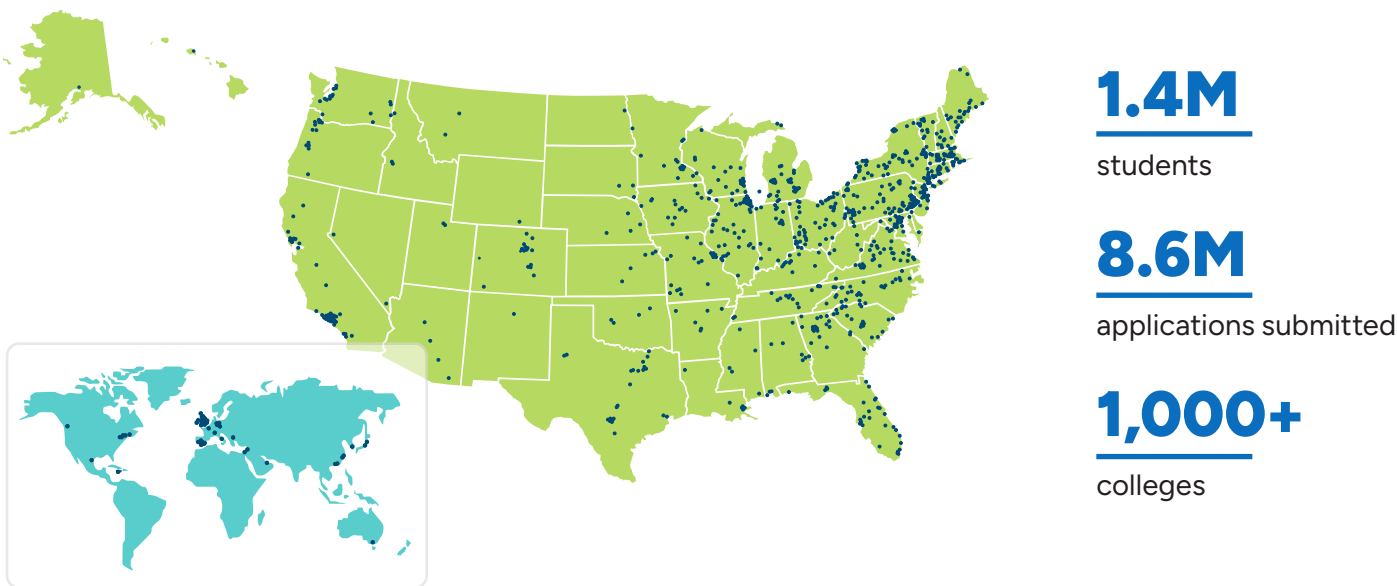
Each dot ○ represents 10K below median-income students

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.

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.

65%
of students opted to respond to the question

28%
of respondents selected four or more activities

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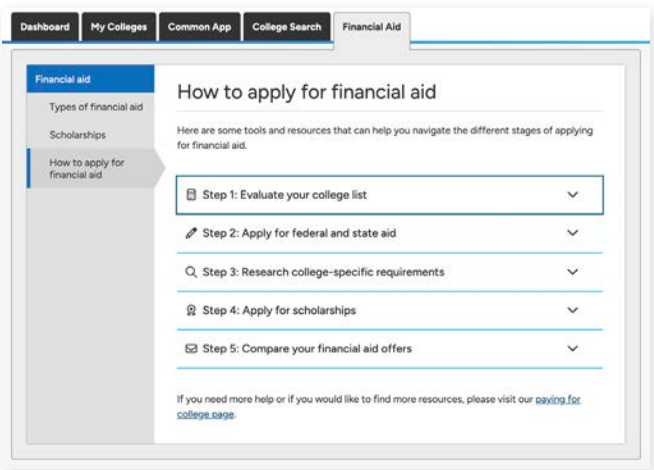
We've updated our in-app resources and Paying for College page. Students and families can now access Better FAFSA resources on our Paying for College Page, on the Financial Aid tab of the first-year application, and the Help Center of the transfer application.

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

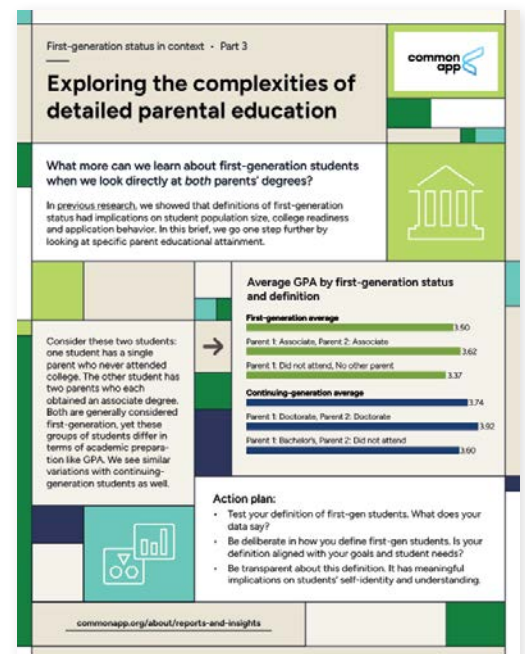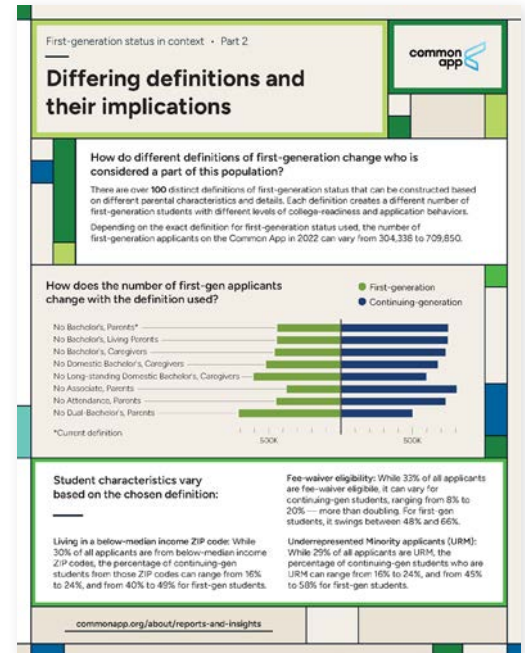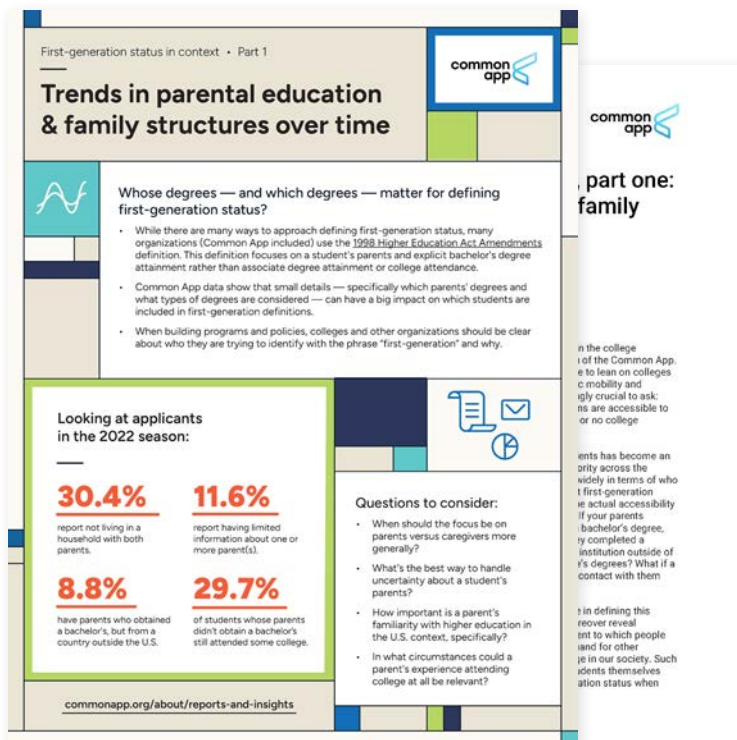Transfer brief

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.

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.

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.

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.

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**

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