

Common App Call for Research Proposals, AY 2024-2025:

Exploring the role of high school contexts in college access



Executive summary

As part of our commitment to being a leading voice for equity in the college application process and to guide our ambitious moonshot goal to close our equity gap in low- and middle-income students applying for postsecondary opportunities, **the Common App is soliciting research project proposals from the broader social science research community to leverage the unique depth and breadth of our de-identified data warehouse on first-year college applicants to help advance our collective understanding of the relationship between students' high school contexts/communities and college access.** These proposals should focus on producing, interpreting, and making actionable novel measures of college preparedness, student demographics, academic and extracurricular opportunity, and/or student application behavior that ultimately help Common App and its constituents promote equity in college access – though projects examining other closely related dynamics and questions will still be considered.

Interested researchers should write a concise (max 1500 words) Letter of Intent describing:

1. Project motivation (i.e., motivating context and synthesis of relevant literature)
2. Explicit research questions
3. Requested data elements (in general terms)
4. Proposed methodology and analytic approach (in general terms)
5. Anticipated project value/contribution – both to practice and research

Please also attach to the document (i.e., do not include this text in the word count) a list describing the project team, their affiliations and titles, and any relevant qualifications. Letters of Intent should be submitted to researchproposals@commonapp.org (including “Research Proposal Letter of Intent” in the subject line) by **December 31st, 2024, at 5:00pm ET** to be considered. Your initial audience will be a team of peer researchers, but your ability to create a clear and compelling case for your research for a non-technical audience will ultimately be critical to the competitiveness of your proposal. Semifinalists will be informed by the end of January 2025 of their progression to the next round, with an invitation to submit a more detailed project proposal form with support and collaboration from the internal research team at Common App by the end of February 2025. We anticipate that relevant contracting and data delivery for accepted proposals will be complete by the end of May 2025.

Motivating context

A group of admissions leaders from 15 colleges came together in 1975 to leverage the latest technology of the time - the photocopier - and create a “common” application form to streamline the admission process for students. The Common App was a labor of love for this founding group of admissions officers, all wanting to simplify the ever-complicated college application process. 50 years later, Common App is an international membership organization of 1,100+ colleges and universities, supported by a team of over 150 dedicated professionals.

Over the last decade alone, Common App has made huge strides in expanding access for students. Each year, more than one million students - a third of whom are now first-generation - apply to college, research financial aid and scholarships, and connect to college counseling resources through Common App. And since 2019, low-income applicants have increased at nearly three times the rate of higher-income applicants. Yet despite this great progress, there remains an immense amount of work to be done as students from low-income communities are still significantly underrepresented in our applicant pool. Common App is thus working with its members, high school counselors, and other partners to achieve a bold moonshot goal: **to close our equity gap in low- and middle-income students applying for postsecondary opportunities.**

Critical to the success of our work towards this moonshot goal is the use of our expansive data warehouse to better identify, understand, and address barriers to equity in the college application process. To date, our research work has largely focused on tracking trends, issues, and possible solutions at the *applicant* level (see for example our descriptive research series on First-generation status in context [Parts [1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)], or our program evaluation for our [targeted intervention connecting students to scholarship opportunities](#)). These analyses crucially inform our program design, member outreach, student support materials, and more.

That being said, students do not exist in a vacuum, and their college preparedness, application strategies, formative experiences, additional qualifications, and overall awareness of the college application process are all critically shaped by the high school contexts and communities that they come from. As we expand our research program to drive action both internally and externally, there thus remains an immense amount of value still to be gained from understanding the role these high school communities play in college access for their students. From a research strategy perspective, we are hoping to examine the diverse array of opportunities that high schools represent for students and use this insight to contextualize issues in student-level preparedness and application behaviors.

Our unique data warehouse represents an enormous, and still largely untapped, resource for this critical research, and as such we seek collaboration with skilled researchers from the broader social science community to accelerate and enhance our work in this arena. To illustrate, there are over 3,400 unique high schools – distributed across over 1,700 unique cities

and 20 unique countries, at which we observe at least 500 unique students over the past five application seasons. When examining high schools with at least 100 unique students over the past five application seasons, these numbers leap to an astounding 11,000 unique high schools from 4,000 unique cities and 90 unique countries. Our data warehouse now tracks, for every applicant over the past 10 years, key information about their academics, course-taking, standardized test-taking, [extracurriculars](#), application behaviors ([1](#), [2](#)), [geographic and citizenship circumstances](#), [detailed racial/ethnic identity](#), detailed parental education ([1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)), language, career aspirations, socioeconomics, involvement in community-based organizations, higher education enrollment and graduation (for the 2016-2017 application cohort only),¹ and much more.² We can reference all of these data in tandem with any publicly available information about students' high schools (e.g., NCES Common Core of Data), home contexts (e.g., Census data), and colleges of interest (e.g., IPEDS), as well as any additional private/proprietary data on these subjects that other researchers can bring to bear. An illustrative subset of fields in our data warehouse can be referenced in this publicly available [data dictionary](#) for interested researchers; please note all data are strictly de-identified for students, recommenders, institutions, and high-schools to preserve privacy, and we adhere to all industry best-practices to prevent re-identification risk.

With the sheer amount of student-level application data we can link to these individual high schools and geographic communities, what more can we learn about their resources, opportunities, unique qualities, constraints, and strengths? What might that in turn tell us about the diverse array of students coming from these communities and how we can best support their aspirations and success? How might that inform the products and programs we as Common App lead to support equity in the college application process? How can that further guide our advocacy and support of key ecosystem stakeholders in conducting their work?

We are pursuing all of these questions, and more, with our internal research team, but we recognize the immense value that engagement with the broader research community can bring to this work. As such, we are issuing this Call for Research Proposals to mobilize new perspectives, skill sets, expertise, and resources to enrich and multiply these efforts. We invite interested researchers to submit proposals to conduct research using our de-identified data warehouse with this broader scope and motivation in mind. To provide a set of illustrative examples, researchers may submit research questions such as (but absolutely not limited to):

- What is the relationship between key high school characteristics (enrollment size, teacher-student ratio, counselor-student ratio, socioeconomic demographics, racial demographics, geography, and standardized testing performance) and key student-level application behaviors, readiness indicators, and socioeconomics?

¹ We have access to 6-year enrollment and degree National Student Clearinghouse records for **only** the 2016-2017 application season cohort.

² Please note that for the purposes of this Call for Research Proposals, we will not share any data that identifies our constituent members or other individual stakeholders (e.g., counselors, teachers, students, etc.), nor will we share any open-text response fields due to the difficulty of assessing and preventing unintentional disclosure of personally identifiable information.

- How can we characterize the mean/median/modal college aspirations of students coming from a given high school? What is the distribution of high schools across these measures, and what might that tell us about their college access resources/needs?
- How does the broad array of extracurriculars reported by students coming from a particular high school tell us about the enrichment opportunities afforded to students in that community? How do high schools compare to one another on this extracurricular opportunity metric? How does that relate to the aspirations of, and enrollment behaviors of, students from these schools?

Project proposal process and timeline

Our research proposal process will proceed in three primary selection stages:

- **Step 1:** Interested researchers will submit an initial “Letter of Intent” that articulates at a high-level their proposed research plan and goals (see explicit requirements and directions in the Executive summary section above).
 - All Letters of Intent should be submitted by **December 31st, 2024, at 5:00pm ET** to be considered.
- **Step 2:** Researchers who are selected to move forward (“semifinalists”) will be invited to submit a more detailed proposal expanding on the areas in the Letter of Intent, in addition to information regarding IRB approval processes (where applicable), grant funding stipulations (where applicable), and proposed research project timeline.
 - Researchers will be informed of their progression to this stage by the end of **January, 2025**.
 - Researchers will be asked to submit their complete proposal by the end of **February, 2025**.
- **Step 3:** A smaller set of finalists will be selected from Step 2 and invited to conduct revisions, enhancements, and other improvements to their proposals in collaboration with the internal research team. These proposals will then be finalized and approved to initiate Data Use Agreement drafting and data delivery preparation.
 - Finalists will be informed of their status and begin revision processes in **March, 2025**.
 - Assuming no delays to finalizing the proposal, Data Use Agreements, and data delivery, we anticipate researchers will be able to begin their analyses as early as **May, 2025**.
 - Ideally, project timelines will produce **initial results within one year** of data delivery, and **publicly available reports and memos** (which will be jointly published with Common App) **within two years** of data delivery. Researchers may additionally pursue publications in academic journals, working paper repositories, and so on, at their earliest convenience.

Evaluation criteria

In short, Letters of Intent will need to communicate compelling answers to the following questions to be competitive for selection:

1. Why these research questions?
 - a. What current, rigorous research literature sets the stage for what we currently know about the subject and its importance to our present social/political/economic context?
 - b. What makes these research questions interesting, valuable, and relevant to informing Common App's work on our moonshot goal of closing our equity gap in low- and middle-income students applying for postsecondary opportunities?
 - c. How will knowing the answers to these research questions drive meaningful change, action, and product/program direction for Common App and/or its stakeholders?
 - d. Whom does the work serve? How does it serve said constituencies/audiences?
 - e. How does this work align with the intentions and scope of the Call for Research Proposals as stated?
2. Why these data?
 - a. What makes the Common App's data warehouse particularly well-suited and appropriate for the answering of these research questions?
 - b. In what ways could our data contribute meaningfully above and beyond the extant literature and knowledge on the subject?
3. Why these methods/analytic approaches?
 - a. How will the proposed methods/analytic approaches help us arrive at a rigorous, thoughtful, and well-justified answer to the posed research questions?
 - b. How do the proposed methods/analytic approaches compare to other possible approaches? Why would your proposed approach be the best approach for these questions?
4. Why these researchers?
 - a. What makes this team of researchers particularly well-suited to answering the research questions posed?
 - b. What expertise do these researchers bring to bear on the subject, e.g., from past research experiences and projects, contextual and industry experience, and so on?
 - c. What resources do these researchers bring to bear for conducting the project, e.g., research capacity, unique sources of data to link, platforms for disseminating research and/or engaging additional collaborators, and so on?
5. Why now?
 - a. What about the current climate/context of higher education, college access, socioeconomic equity, etc., indicates that this work is of particularly timely importance or interest?

- b. To what extent do other contextual factors in the education sector help increase the viability of taking meaningful action based on the research insights from this project?

Given the space constraints of the Letter of Intent (1500 words maximum), we recognize the initial letter will only be able to **briefly** touch on most of these aspects. Teams invited to progress to the detailed proposal round should thus be prepared to offer more information and justification on all of these fronts. Further, to ensure the highest quality and impact of research, we will moreover assess the extent to which proposed research aligns with the following criteria:

- **Data Integrity** – How will the researchers ensure that all data and analyses will be conducted in highly secure environments that prevent any unauthorized access/use of the de-identified data?
- **Constituent Dignity** – Does the proposed work honor the trust our constituents place in us and fulfill our obligations as data stewards?
- **Propriety** – Would this be perceived by stakeholders and the public as an appropriate use of Common App data and resources?
- **Political Climate** – How does this work relate to popular sentiment, present and future media cycles, and other dynamics that would impact how the work is ultimately received?
- **Constituent Sensitivities** – Could the proposed work lead to direct or indirect conflict with the interests of our stakeholders and constituents?
- **Research Quality** – Is Common App’s data best-positioned to make contributions to this issue? Can we stand by the work and feel confident in its claims?
- **Research Integrity** – What caveats and limitations must we be aware of, and transparent about, when disseminating and/or using the research?

Lastly, all research must be led by established principal investigators with a proven track record of high-quality, published research in reputable social science (broadly defined) journals, and with a demonstrated ability to follow through on the longer-term timelines necessitated by this collaborative research structure. Researchers must be situated in an organizational context that supports and assists in the management of research partnerships with resources like IRB approval, grant management, budget oversight, and contracting (e.g., higher education institutions, non-profit research institutes, state and government agencies, etc.). We strongly encourage and will support researchers of all backgrounds, identities, skill sets, and fields of expertise to apply.

Additional information

Additional questions about this Call for Research Proposals can be directed to data@commonapp.org with the subject line: “Call for Research Proposals Inquiry”.

Legal

The Common Application, Inc. ("Common App"), in its sole discretion, reserves the right to accept or reject research proposal submissions in consideration of the above referenced Call for Research Proposals. Common App, in its sole discretion, reserves the right to amend or cancel this request for any reason at any time. Common App, in its sole discretion, may select research proposals for the proposed project on criteria it determines.

This Call for Research Proposals does not in any way create a guarantee or obligation for Common App to enter into a contractual agreement with any respondent hereto. Common App is not liable, financially, or otherwise for any costs or actions taken in the preparation or submission of a proposal in response to this Call for Research Proposals. Notwithstanding the foregoing, should Common App select a research proposal submitted hereunder, the selected Researcher will be expected to enter into an agreement with Common App for the project subject to negotiation of the final agreement.