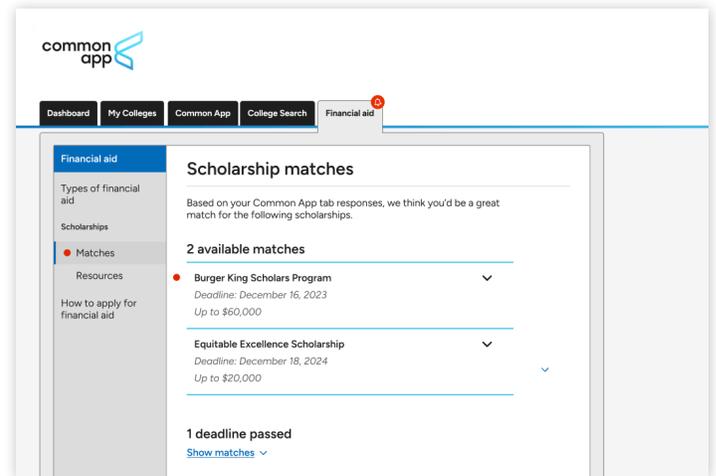# Advancing equitable scholarship awarding through outreach

Results from 2023–2024 partnerships

In 2024, Common App continued its partnership with Scholarship America, the largest administrator of private scholarships in the country, with a goal of connecting low- and middle-income students to scholarship opportunities to fund their postsecondary pathway.

This year, we piloted a new scholarship matching feature on the financial aid tab of the application.

**By combining email outreach with in-app notifications, we were able to connect underrepresented students with nearly $5M in scholarships, compared to $350K in 2022–2023.**



**$350K** in 2022–2023 → **$5M** in 2023–2024

**4** participating providers

**89K** students reached

## Our intervention drove...

**2X** increase in application rates of under-represented students to scholarship partners

**18%** increase in both first-generation and underrepresented minority applicants to scholarship partners' applicant pools

**4X** increase in the likelihood of receiving a scholarship for students receiving in-app notifications and emails versus no outreach

# Advancing equitable scholarship awarding through outreach: Results from 2023–2024 partnerships

October 31, 2024

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## Introduction

Common App continues to push forward on our moonshot goal to expand the number of low- and middle-income students aspiring to a college degree on our platform. We know from research on postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and graduation that getting these students to apply to college alone isn't enough to ensure their success — we need to expand supports that help them afford college as well. We've made it a core part of our strategy to find new and comprehensive ways to connect students with financial aid resources, information, and opportunities throughout the application process.

We recently published results from the 2022–2023 application season of our continuing partnership with Scholarship America and select participating private scholarship providers. In 2022–2023, Common App's email outreach to eligible low-income students and students from underrepresented minority (URM) groups more than doubled

students' likelihood of applying for partner scholarships, increased the numbers of first-generation and URM applicants scholarship partners received, and increased the value of scholarship dollars that students received.[1] Motivated by these promising results, we expanded our partnership with Scholarship America from two to four private scholarship partners for 2023–2024 and added in-app notifications as an outreach strategy in addition to email.

In this brief, we share findings from this most recent year of work to connect low-income and URM students to scholarship opportunities for the 2023–2024 application season. With the benefit of rigorous evaluation methods during and after the deployment of this outreach, we are proud to share the following:

1. Common App's new combined outreach strategy using emails and in-app notifications more than doubled application rates of underrepresented students to competitive, high-value scholarships administered by Scholarship America.

2. Common App's outreach greatly increased the diversity of scholarship partners' applicant pools, increasing first-generation and URM applicants close to 18% each.

3. Underrepresented students were awarded over $4.8 million more in scholarship value over four years than they would have been without Common App's intervention.

In the remainder of this brief, we explain the updates to the informational outreach for 2023–2024, describe the results of the intervention, and synthesize key takeaways on college affordability for the students who need it most.

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[1] We use the term underrepresented minority (URM) in alignment with conventions employed by the National Science Foundation. In this report, applicants identifying as Black or African American, Latinx, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander are classified as URM applicants.

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## Key findings

1. **Expanding the scholarship intervention to in-application notifications drove higher engagement:** While students engaged at high rates with scholarship opportunity outreach emails from Common App, their engagement with in-app notifications was even higher: Among students who received in-app notifications, 40.4% of students opened them and **44.0% of students who opened the in-app notifications clicked through to take action.**

2. **Students who received outreach on scholarship opportunities were more likely to apply than were those who didn't receive outreach.** This effect was strongest for students who received in-app notifications alongside email: **8.2% of students receiving in-app notifications plus emails applied to a participating provider, compared to 5.0% of students who received email only, and 3.5% of students who received no outreach.**

3. **Students who received in-app notifications plus emails were 5 times as likely to receive a scholarship as were students who did not receive outreach.** This indicates that the intervention was also successful in connecting students to opportunities for which they were eligible and competitive. Among students who applied for at least one scholarship, treated students were twice as likely to receive a scholarship relative to students who received no outreach.

4. **The intervention drove more than $4.8 million in scholarship aid over the next 4 years to underrepresented students**. This result reflects both the intervention's impact on the diversity of the scholarship providers' applicant pools and the strong qualifications of the students identified to receive notifications about their eligibility for these awards.

5. **Common App's outreach greatly increased the diversity of scholarship partners' applicant pools, increasing first-generation and URM applicants close to 18% each**.

## Scholarship outreach goals and process

Common App continues to commit to connecting underrepresented students on its platform with private scholarship opportunities for which they are competitive. We can play a crucial role in supporting access to affordability opportunities and resources, including private scholarships, for students who will benefit most from these resources. In past application seasons, we partnered with Scholarship America to provide email-only outreach to eligible students to inform them about the Equitable Excellence Scholarship® and a technology industry scholarship opportunity. We detailed the findings of the Equitable partnership from 2022–23 in [this research brief](#) released last year.

Building on the encouraging results of that intervention, we expanded our scholarship initiative for the 2023–24 application season to encompass more partners. In addition, we integrated outreach directly into the app to try to reach more students . Two research questions thus guided our 2023–24 partnership with Scholarship America:

1. Does the addition of in-app notifications to our existing email outreach increase students' likelihood of applying to scholarship opportunities that we identify for them?

2. What impact did Common App outreach have on the diversity of scholarship providers' applicant and recipient pools?

In 2023–24, Common App continued to work with the Equitable Foundation and the technology company and added Burger King and an undisclosed industry company as new partners. Working closely with Scholarship America, we launched an integration to automatically screen students for partner scholarships for which they were eligible, based on the data in their first submitted college application, and automated screening could ensure we could continue to scale our outreach and include more partners going forward. Table 1 provides an overview of the deadlines, eligibility requirements, number of awards, award sizes, and targeting criteria for each scholarship opportunity.

**Table 1: Scholarship partner program details**

| Scholarship | Main requirements | Award details | Common App targeting criteria |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Burger King Scholars**<br><br>Deadline: December 15, 2023 | High school senior in the U.S., Puerto Rico, or Canada | One-time awards ranging from $1,000 to $60,000<br><br>4,200 total recipients | GPA, extracurricular activities, Common App fee waiver eligibility |
| **Technology industry scholarship***<br><br>Deadline: December 15, 2023 | High school senior in the U.S.; plan to obtain a bachelor's degree in a computer science-related field; demonstrated financial need; minimum GPA of 2.3 on 4.0 scale (or equivalent) | $40,000 ($10,000/yr for up to 4 years)<br><br>400 recipients | Career interest, GPA, Common App fee waiver eligibility |
| **Equitable Excellence Scholarship®***<br><br>Deadline: December 18, 2023 | High school senior in the U.S. or Puerto Rico; minimum GPA of 2.5 on 4.0 scale (or equivalent) | $20,000 ($5,000/yr for up to 4 years) OR $2,500 (one-time)<br><br>200 total recipients | Fee waiver eligibility, GPA |
| **Undisclosed industry scholarship**<br><br>Deadline: January 8, 2024 | High school senior in the U.S.; plan to obtain a degree or certificate in education, counseling, psychology, or nursing; minimum GPA of 2.5 on 4.0 scale (or equivalent) | Up to $5,000/yr for students attending two-year institutions OR up to $10,000/yr for students attending four-year institutions, renewable for up to 5 years total or up to completion of a bachelor's degree | Intended major, GPA, Common App fee waiver eligibility |

***** *denotes returning partners*

In order to bring information about scholarship opportunities directly to students in the first-year application, we designed a new Scholarships section for the Financial Aid tab, where students could see basic information about the scholarship programs with which they were matched through our integration. We also designed a notification feature to alert students to their matches four weeks ahead of the scholarship deadline and then again at one week.

**Figure 1: Illustration of in-app scholarship notification for 2023-2024 outreach**
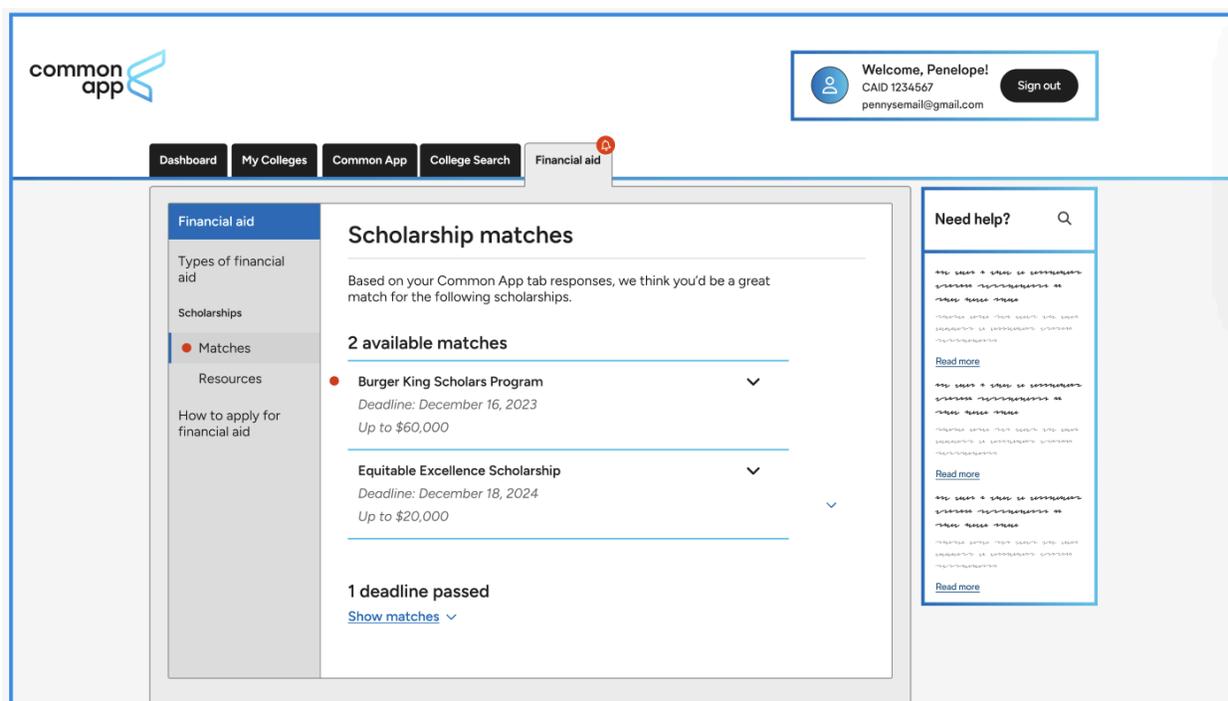


We conducted our outreach using a framework known as a "randomized controlled trial." In essence, we wanted to learn as concretely as possible: what was the actual impact of receiving in-app notifications and emails from us on applying for, and receiving, a scholarship? In order to know this, we needed to compare groups of students who received both in-app notifications and emails (one "treated" group) to students who received emails only (a second "treated" group) and to comparable students who didn't receive any outreach (a "control" group).

To do this, we took the full set of eligible students and randomly selected a small subset (5% of students) to not receive any outreach. We then randomly selected another subset (10% of students) to receive emails only. The remaining 85% of eligible students would receive both in-app notifications and emails for each scholarship for which they were eligible. We could then use the students not receiving any outreach as a direct and reliable comparison for students who

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received one or both kinds of outreach, because the only thing that made these groups different was the luck of the draw. We could also compare students receiving both in-app notifications and emails directly to students who received emails only.

In total, we reached out to 56,578 students regarding the Burger King Scholars program, 49,859 students for the Equitable Excellence Scholarship®, 23,939 students for the undisclosed industry scholarship, and 12,213 students for the technology industry scholarship, for a grand total of 89,252 unique students.[2]
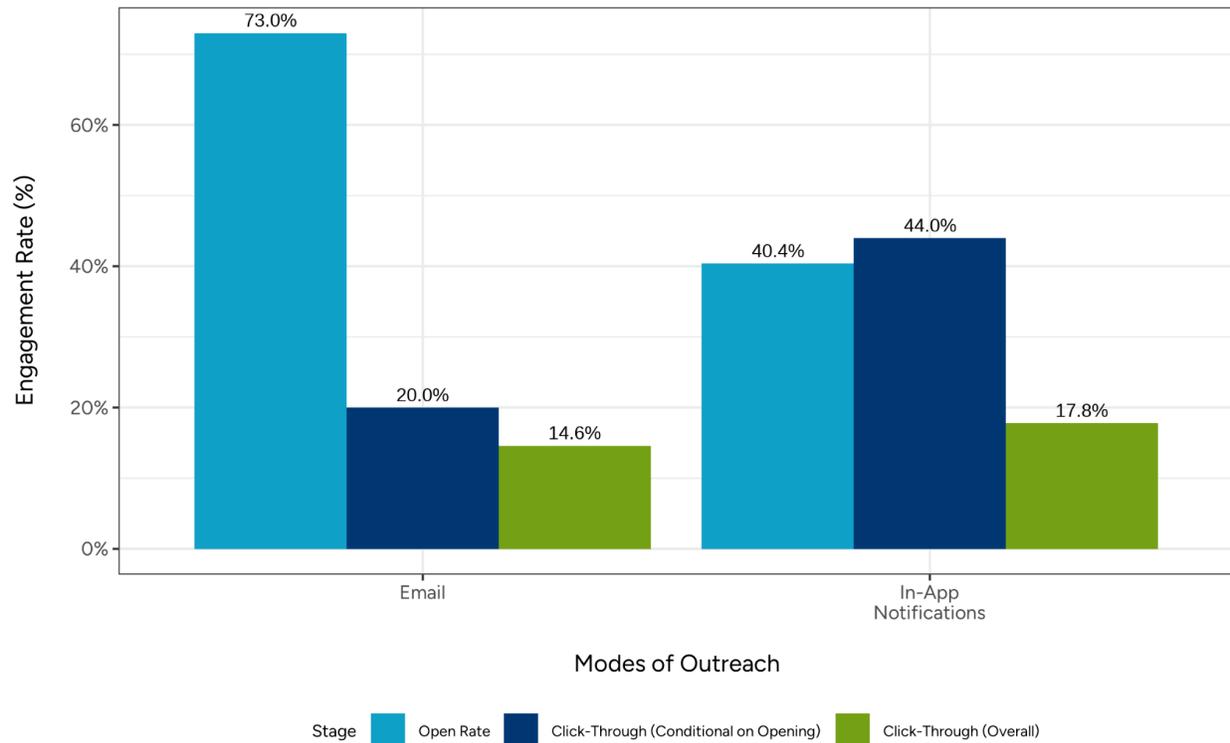
## Engagement with the informational outreach

Students continued to engage with email outreach at high rates, and engagement with the new in-app notifications we introduced this year was even higher than the engagement with email, as illustrated in Figure 2. Emails with information about scholarship opportunities had a 73.0% open rate, and 20.0% of students who opened the emails clicked through to take action, for an overall click-through rate of 14.6% prior to the corresponding deadline. The overall click-through rate more than doubled from the comparable rate of 7.0% in 2022–23. In this first year of offering in-app notifications in tandem with email outreach, in-app notifications had a 40.4% open rate, and 44.0% of students who opened the notifications clicked through, for an overall click-through rate of 17.8% — higher than the click-through rates for emails alone in any of the three prior years of Common App's scholarships interventions.

Follow-up surveys with students who received outreach also suggest that students who received both in-app notifications and emails were more likely to remember hearing about the scholarship opportunities than were students who received emails only. These engagement results continue to illustrate that students have interest in receiving information about scholarship opportunities from Common App, and that reaching students directly in the application can be hugely beneficial for action follow-through.

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[2] Students eligible for multiple scholarships were placed in the same type of treatment group for each scholarship. This ensured that there were no instances of students receiving emails only for one opportunity and emails plus in-app notifications for another opportunity.

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**Figure 2: Students' engagement with email and in-app notifications**



**Impact on scholarship applications**

Beyond opening and engaging with the in-app notifications and emails, we also examined the effects of both treatment arms on students' likelihood of applying for at least one scholarship, and these results are illustrated in Figure 3.

Across partners, 8.2% of students who received in-app notifications and emails applied to at least one participating partner, compared to 5.0% of students who received emails only and 3.5% of students in the control group. In other words, **students who received in-app notifications and emails were more than twice as likely to apply for at least one scholarship relative to students in the control group**. Students who received emails only were still more than 40% more likely to apply for at least one scholarship than were students in the control group.[3]

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[3] Both named differences are statistically significant at least at the 5% level. Students who received in-app notifications plus emails were also statistically significantly more likely to apply than were students who received emails only.

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**Figure 3: Rates of students' applications to scholarship partners, by intervention treatment arm**
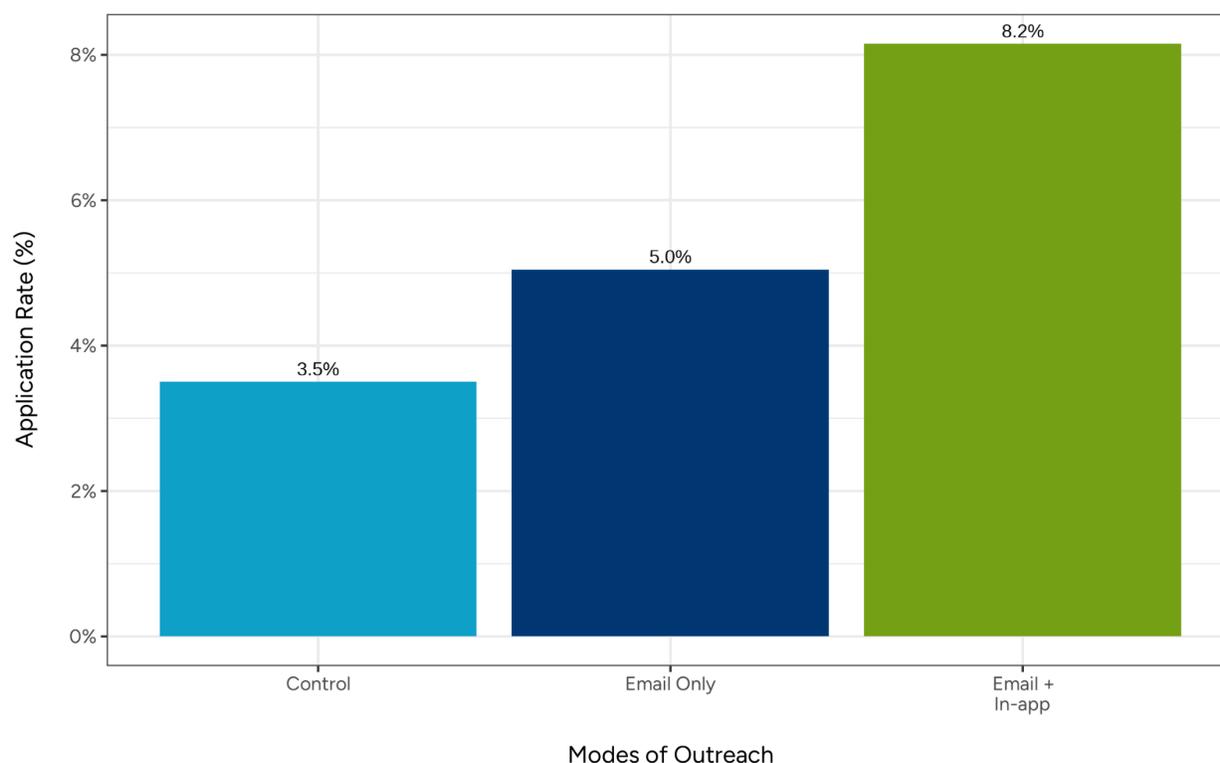


## Impact on scholarship receipt

We also examined the effects of the intervention on scholarship receipt, both for students overall and specifically for those students who applied for a scholarship.

Overall, students who received outreach through the intervention were more likely to receive a scholarship than were students who did not receive outreach: Among all students in the intervention, 0.9% of students who received in-app notifications and emails received a scholarship, compared to 0.6% of students who received emails only and 0.2% of control students. In other words, **students who received both in-app notifications and emails were about five times as likely to receive a scholarship as control students were, and students who received emails only were three times as likely to receive a scholarship relative to control students**. Figure 4

illustrates these results for each treatment arm[4] (and see Table 1 above for context details, including the number of scholarships awarded by each partner).

**Figure 4: Rates of students' receipt of scholarships by treatment arm**
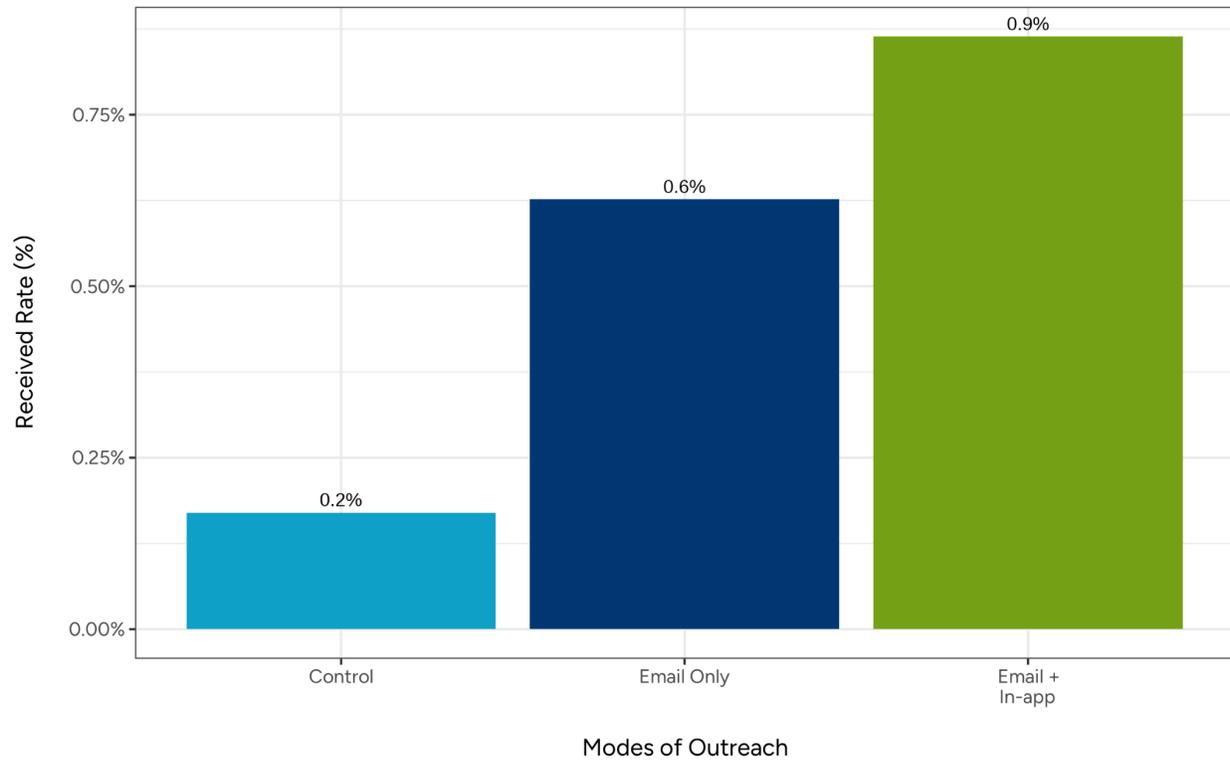


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[4] Both named differences are statistically significant at least at the 5% level. Students who received in-app notifications plus emails were also statistically significantly more likely to receive a scholarship than were students who received emails only.

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**Figure 5: Rates of students' receipt of scholarships among students who applied for scholarships, by treatment arm**
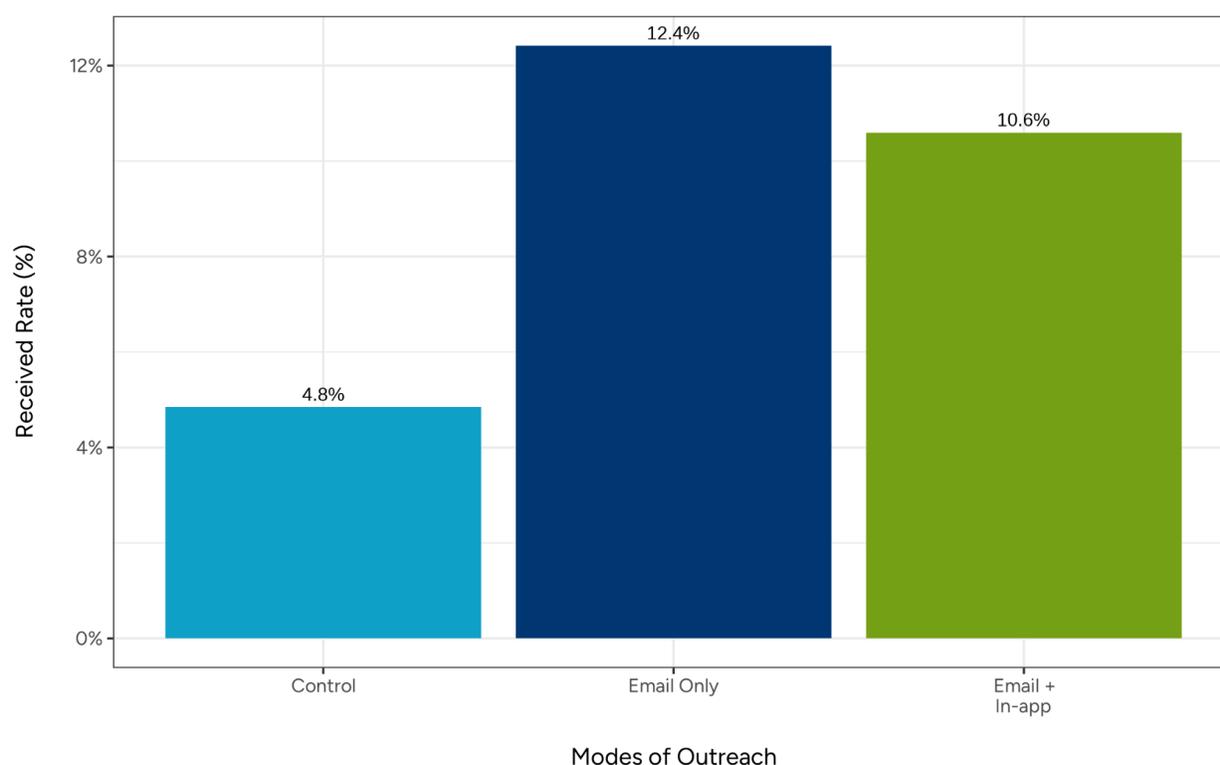


We also examined the rates of scholarship receipt among students who applied, and these results are illustrated in Figure 5. Overall, **students who received informational outreach from Common App and applied for at least one scholarship were more than twice as likely to receive a scholarship compared to control students who applied for at least one scholarship**.[5]

In earlier intervention cycles, we found that students referred by Common App were less likely to receive the Equitable Excellence Scholarship® than were students not referred by Common App . This was largely because the selection rubric prioritized GPA much more strongly than the criteria we used for targeting the email outreach. As a result of this finding, Scholarship America worked with Equitable Foundation to prioritize financial need more strongly in selection, and consequently scholarship receipt rates for students in the Common App intervention exceeded those of other students in 2022–23.

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[5] Students in each treatment arm were statistically significantly more likely than control students were to receive a scholarship among those who applied, but the difference in rate of scholarship receipt between scholarship applicants who received in-app notifications and emails and students who received emails only was not statistically significant.

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In 2023–24, applicants referred by Common App for both the Equitable Excellence Scholarship® and the technology industry scholarship were between two and three times as likely to receive a scholarship as were applicants not referred by Common App, reflecting the collaborative efforts of Scholarship America and scholarship providers to hone scoring models to ensure they distribute their funds equitably.

We also calculated the value of scholarship dollars received per student for students in the control group and in both treatment arms, assuming students eligible for multi-year renewable awards maintained eligibility for the whole period. **We estimated the additional impact of our intervention (relative to students in the control group) to be $4.8 million in value over the next four years to underrepresented students**.

## Diversity of partners' applicant pools

In addition to investigating how students responded to Common App's emails and in-app notifications, we also wanted to understand the extent to which this intervention meaningfully changed the demographic characteristics of our scholarship partners' applicant pools. In other words, did Common App's outreach allow scholarship providers to recruit more underrepresented applicants they might select, relative to those they see from business-as-usual marketing and outreach on their own?

Across partners, Common App referred an average of 14.0% of each partner's applicant pool, including 26.8% of URM applicants and 23.5% of their first-generation applicants on average. **Applicants referred by Common App were much more likely to be first-generation students relative to other applicants for each partner**, with on average 70.5% of applicants referred by Common App having first-generation status and 34.9% of applicants not referred by Common App being first-generation.

Applicants referred by Common App had a Suggested Parent Contribution (Scholarship America's approach to calculating ability to pay for college) of $4,932 across three partners using this measure, compared to $21,837 for applicants not referred by Common App. In other words, **applicants referred by Common App had substantially higher financial need compared to applicants not referred by Common App**.

In lieu of asking students about their Suggested Parent Contribution, administrators of the Burger King Scholars program instead asked students questions about their financial context. Applicants referred by Common App were more likely to indicate that:

- they had family members depend on their income,
- their families struggled with meeting basic needs,
- they worried about food,
- they experienced housing insecurity, and
- they experienced job loss.

Applicants referred by Common App reported experiencing an average of 1.33 of these items, compared to 0.95 for applicants not referred by Common App.

We also examined URM and first-generation students in the control group and assumed other students would have applied for each scholarship at the same rates without any outreach. We used any difference in scholarship application rates for underrepresented students in the two treatment arms to estimate the number of underrepresented students who applied as a result of Common App's outreach. **On average across all partners, Common App's outreach drove an increase of 17.8% in URM applicants and an increase of 18.2% in first-generation applicants**.[6]

## Conclusion and next steps

Common App's scholarships outreach efforts yield several key takeaways for 2023–24. First, we have rigorous evidence that the new combination of in-app notifications and emails was a successful innovation in terms of all metrics evaluated. Both outreach channels had high open and click-through rates, and the combination of approaches had the largest positive effects on students' likelihood of applying for and receiving scholarships, overall and for each individual partner. Consistent with previous years, Common App's interventions had success in diversifying partners' applicant pools, driving increases in first-generation and URM applicants for all four partners. Together, the positive impact on scholarship receipt and diversity of scholarship applicants generated over $4.8 million in value of scholarship aid over the next four years for underrepresented students.

For returning partners in 2023–24, we saw that applicants referred by Common App were between two and three times as likely to receive those scholarships compared

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[6] Estimated increases in URM and first-generation applicant pools use Common App data to characterize students in the Common App intervention who did not apply for the scholarship and use data from the scholarship partners to characterize applicants for the scholarship who did not use Common App.

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to applicants Common App did not refer, reflecting the work Scholarship America has done to align the targeting criteria for the intervention with scoring criteria for the awards. New partners for 2023–24 realized similar benefits to continuing partners in their engagement rates and the impact on the diversity of their applicant pools.

In the 2024-25 application season, Common App will again partner with Scholarship America and notify students of scholarship opportunities within the app. New for 2024-25, Common App will also partner with the [National Scholarship Providers Association (NSPA)](#) to utilize the NSPA Exchange, a database with information about over 20,000 scholarship opportunities. This partnership will enable Common App to match more students with relevant scholarship opportunities and again communicate information about these opportunities to students directly in the app. This new partnership represents an important opportunity to apply lessons learned from the 2023–24 season to many more students and scholarship opportunities. Together with our partners, Common App will continue to pursue innovative opportunities to improve college affordability for low-income and underrepresented students.