

Common App Call for Research Proposals, AY 2025-2026:

Generating actionable insights from high school course-taking data



Executive summary

Building off the success of our inaugural Call for Research Proposals [last year](#), Common App is excited to once again solicit proposals from the broader social science research community that leverage the unique depth and breadth of our de-identified data warehouse on first-year college applicants¹ to advance our collective understanding of higher education. This year, **we are seeking proposals that will generate actionable insights for our stakeholders, our collaborators, and our own organization, using the millions of high school course-taking records students submit through our platform each year.** These proposals should focus on producing, interpreting, and making actionable novel measures of college preparedness, course-taking behaviors and rigor, academic opportunity, and/or student skill competencies that will shape the work of Common App and its constituents in promoting college access and success – though projects examining other compelling questions will still be considered.

Interested researchers should write a concise (max 1000 words) Letter of Intent summarizing:

1. Brief project motivation and context
2. Explicit research questions
3. Proposed analytic approach and required Common App data (in general terms)
4. Anticipated project contribution to Common App and stakeholder practices

Please also attach to the document (i.e., do not include this text in the word count) a list briefly describing the project team, their affiliations and titles, and any relevant qualifications, as well as a bibliography/references section when appropriate. Letters of Intent should be submitted to researchproposals@commonapp.org (including “Research Proposal Letter of Intent” in the subject line) by **December 31st, 2025, at 5:00pm ET** to be considered. Your initial audience will be a team of peer researchers. Still, your ability to create a clear and compelling case for your research to a non-technical audience will ultimately be critical to the competitiveness of your proposal. Semifinalists will be informed by the end of January 2026 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 2026. We anticipate that relevant contracting, honoraria awards, and data delivery for accepted proposals will be completed as early as September 2026.

¹ We thank the Gates Foundation for their support in building our data warehouse and research infrastructure. This opportunity is based on research funded (or in part) by the Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Gates Foundation.

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 admissions 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 greatly expand postsecondary opportunities for low- and middle-income students across the country as the primary goal of our [Next Chapter](#) work.**

Critical to the success of our work towards this goal is the use of our expansive data warehouse to better identify, understand, and address barriers in the college application process. Through our internally-driven research publications, we analyze key trends in applicant characteristics like [independent student status](#), [STEMM career interests](#), and [parental education](#), and we publish evaluations for major programs like our [targeted intervention connecting students to scholarship opportunities](#). These public-facing research projects crucially inform our program design, members’ outreach and student support strategies, state partnerships, and more, and also speak to key issues of higher education access and success for our stakeholders more broadly.

That said, we can only go so far using our internal research capacity and expertise alone. Recognizing these limitations and the immense value still to be unlocked from our data warehouse, we launched our [first-ever Call for Research Proposals](#) last year to solicit collaboration from the broader social science research community and accelerate our collective understanding of the relationship between students’ high school contexts/communities and college access. We now have several exciting projects underway to better understand key factors like:

- The role of geography in students’ college choice formation
- The impact of counselors in supporting students’ college aspirations
- The relationship between students’ high school contexts and their broader postsecondary pathways

These projects will all directly serve our Next Chapter work and will greatly enhance how we understand and approach high schools as stakeholders and partners in our mission.

As we continue to unlock greater value and insight from our data warehouse to better serve our students, our members, and the broader higher education community, we now turn our focus to another as-yet untapped area of the data we receive from well over a million applicants each year: detailed course-taking records. As context, students can submit their course-taking information via three distinct areas of the application:

- **Most recent courses:** All students are required to submit the subject,² name (open response), level,³ and term schedule⁴ for all courses they are taking/took in their most recent academic year. While students do not report grades for individual courses in this section, they are required to submit a cumulative GPA.
- **College and University attendance:** Students are required to report any colleges/universities that they have attended, the type of enrollment (dual enrollment, summer program, or standard credit), enrollment dates, and any degrees received. Students do not report information on individual courses taken at colleges/universities.
- **Courses and grades:** Finally, approximately 10% of applicants each year are also required⁵ to input all the details of their full high school transcript (the “Courses and Grades” section) – tracking subject/name/level/term *and* corresponding course grades and credits for all courses taken across any high schools attended (for grades 9th-12th).

Combined, our unique data warehouse represents one of the most comprehensive, and still largely untapped, datasets linking detailed student course-taking to key demographic, academic, and college application characteristics for a national sample of college-aspiring students. As such, we seek collaboration with skilled researchers from the broader social science community to help us leverage and make actionable these data in pursuit of our mission. To illustrate using just a single year of data out of over a decade available in our data warehouse: Approximately 1.3 million domestic students attending U.S. high schools submitted at least one application through Common App in the 2024-2025 academic year. These students submitted a combined total of over **18 million course-taking records** (student-by-course level), at least partially capturing the wide range of course-taking opportunities at over 10,000 distinct high schools.

By virtue of our comprehensive data warehouse, this wealth of course-taking data can be joined directly to key information about students’ standardized test-taking, [extracurriculars](#),

² Selected via a structured drop-down menu with options such as Algebra, Calculus, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Religion, Art, and so on.

³ Selected via a structured drop-down menu with options such as Regular/Standard, Accelerated, Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, Gifted, and so on.

⁴ Selected via a structured drop-down menu based on the indicated term structure of their high school (e.g., first or second semester, or full-year, for semester systems).

⁵ The Courses and Grades section is required when students choose to apply to [specific institutions requiring it](#) as part of their application.

application behaviors ([1](#), [2](#)), [detailed racial/ethnic identity](#), detailed parental education ([1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)), languages spoken, career aspirations, low-income status, involvement in community-based organizations, postsecondary enrollment and graduation (for the 2016-2017 application cohort only),⁶ and much more.⁷ 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 that 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. Readers familiar with the [Education-to-Workforce Indicator Framework](#) will note the wide variety of Essential Questions,⁸ Indicators,⁹ and Disaggregates¹⁰ that our data can ultimately speak to.

Importantly, the numbers above again reflect only a single year of **over a decade of data available** to us for analysis via our data warehouse. With the sheer amount of student- and school-level data we can link to these course-taking records, what more could we ultimately learn about the landscape of student course-taking behavior and opportunities across high schools in the United States? And over time? What could this tell us about students' college readiness and the context of their application aspirations? What could we learn about the skills students build throughout their high school careers, or about the networks of peers they intersect with? How might all of this inform the products and programs we, as Common App, lead to support college access and success? How can that further guide our advocacy and support of key ecosystem stakeholders in conducting their work with students, as well?

⁶ We have access to 6-year enrollment and degree National Student Clearinghouse records for **only** the 2016-2017 application season cohort with generous support from the Gates Foundation.

⁷ Please note that for the purposes of this Call for Research Proposals, we will not share any data that may identify our constituent members or other individual stakeholders (e.g., counselors, teachers, students, etc.), nor will we share any other open-text response fields due to the difficulty of assessing and preventing unintentional disclosure of personally identifiable information. By default, we cannot approve of any analyses focusing on student or institutional groupings with cell sizes smaller than 50.

⁸ In particular, we see great opportunity for speaking to Essential Questions 6 ("[Do students have access to quality school environments, including quality curricula and instruction, experienced teachers, effective leaders, and adequate funding?](#)"), 12 ("[Do students have access to and complete rigorous and accelerated college preparatory coursework?](#)"), and 15 ("[Are there quality pathways for students who pursue career training that lead to employment in quality jobs?](#)")

⁹ Our data allow researchers to potentially examine indicators like (but not limited to): [grade point average](#), [access to college preparatory coursework](#), [access to in-demand CTE pathways](#), [access to early college coursework](#), [early college coursework completion](#), [digital skills](#), [communication skills](#), [higher-order thinking skills](#), [high school graduation](#), [college applications](#), [selection of a well-matched postsecondary institution](#), and [postsecondary enrollment directly after high school graduation](#)

¹⁰ Nearly every Education-to-Workforce Indicator Framework disaggregate is present at the student-level in our data, such as: [income level](#), [parental education level](#), [first-generation college student](#), [English learner](#), [K-12 school type](#), [student parenting status](#), [race and ethnicity](#), and [age group](#)

That being said, **these data also present an enormous technical challenge** we have yet to overcome: students submit course names via open response text, which means that making any real meaning out of these data will require a rigorous and advanced approach to standardizing and harmonizing the text data. Of the aforementioned 18 million course-taking records, we observe about 2.3 million unique course names. While approximately 13,000 course names are listed by at least 100 different students, nearly 70% of all course names in the data (1.6 million unique course names) are submitted by only a **single** student. The complexity of this task is made all the greater when trying to harmonize across high schools within a given year, or across the over ten years of such data we have aggregated into our combined data warehouse.

We are thus issuing this Call for Research Proposals to mobilize new perspectives, skill sets, expertise, and resources to at last generate actionable insights from these rich but complex course-taking data. We invite interested researchers to submit proposals covering research questions such as (but absolutely not limited to):

- Can we create a unified index of course-taking rigor for students on our platform? What can we then learn about patterns of course-taking rigor by comparing across key student demographics like first-generation status, low-income status, and more?
- Can we create a unified index of course-taking opportunity for high schools on our platform? What can we then learn about the relationship between course-taking opportunity and key high school characteristics, like teacher-student ratio, counselor-student ratio, socioeconomic demographics, and more?
 - Can we also identify patterns of access to high-value course-taking opportunities (e.g., Robotics, Computer Science, or defined using any number of frameworks) across high schools?
- How does course-taking throughout a student's high school trajectory relate to the career interest and majors that students express at the time of application? What might this tell us about crucial disparities and pipeline concerns for high needs fields of study?
- Can we identify key patterns of student network formation through shared course-taking at the same high school, in the same year? What might this tell us about how students form and co-create college aspirations?

Please also note that projects should avoid overlap with the accepted projects described above from last year's proposal cycle.

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 (see explicit requirements and directions in the "Executive summary" section above).
 - All Letters of Intent should be submitted by **December 31st, 2025, 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, 2026**.
 - Researchers will be asked to submit their complete proposal by the end of **February, 2026**.
- **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 revisions in **March, 2026**.
 - Assuming no delays to revisions, Data Use Agreements, and data delivery, researchers will be able to begin their analyses as early as **September, 2026**.
 - Ideally, project teams will produce **initial results within one year** of data delivery, and **publicly available reports and memos** (which may 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

Letters of Intent will need to successfully communicate preliminary (and very concise) answers to each of the following questions in the 1000 words allotted:

1. What context and past work motivates your intended research questions? (recommended ~150 words)
2. What are your exact research questions? (recommended ~100 words)
3. What tools or strategies can you leverage to solve the inherent data cleaning challenges of the course-taking data? (recommended ~300 words)
 - a. Please indicate your primary data analysis language/platform as part of this response. Strong preference will be given to proposals leveraging **open-source toolsets available via the R and Python ecosystems** to facilitate future implementation in our broader data warehouse processes, but all approaches will be considered.
4. Once the course-taking data are harmonized, what additional data and analytical methods will you use to answer your stated research questions? (recommended ~300 words)
 - a. You need not list out the individual data elements required in your analysis in the Letter of Intent stage, but please do ensure all data critical to your approach are actually listed as available in our public-facing [data dictionary](#).

5. How will the answers to these questions, and any other ensuing work produced as part of this analysis, ultimately inform and serve the work of Common App and its stakeholders? (recommended ~150 words)

Given the space constraints of the Letter of Intent (1000 words maximum), we recognize that the initial letter will only be able to **briefly** touch on most of these aspects and are expecting **very high-level “pitches”** in the initial stage to respect the time and energies of applicants. Only teams invited to progress to the detailed proposal round, in which selection odds are much higher, will be asked to offer more information and justification on each of these fronts.

Please also append to the document (i.e., do not include this text in the word count) a brief description of the project team (including their affiliations and titles, and any relevant qualifications; please no more than a few sentences per person), as well as a bibliography/references section when appropriate. Besides adhering to the word limit and addressing the questions above, Letters of Intent will not be evaluated for formatting or structure; please use whatever format feels least burdensome and most suitable for your team. It may be helpful to list and respond to each question explicitly; if you choose to format your Letter of Intent this way, do not include the question text in your word counts.

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.

Lastly, as context for the broader selection process, **Semifinalists** invited to submit a full proposal will also be evaluated on the extent to which they are able to convey alignment with our core research values:

- **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 and valuable use of Common App data and resources?
- **Timeliness** – How does this work relate to current events, popular sentiment, present and future media cycles, and other dynamics that would impact how the work is ultimately received, interpreted, and used?

- **Constituent Alignment** – Does the proposed work support and further the interests and missions of our constituents? Could the proposed work lead to direct or indirect conflict with 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?

Frequently asked questions

- **Are graduate/doctoral students allowed to apply?**
 - All partnerships initiated through this process require a heavy time investment and long-term commitment on Common App's part, due at least in part to the high sensitivity of the data. As mentioned above, successful proposals will thus need to demonstrate a high level of expertise with complex data analysis, longer-term institutional stability, and a successful track record of past data partnerships. For these reasons, while graduate students are not explicitly forbidden from applying, we will heavily prefer research teams led by researchers with substantial experience.
- **Is there funding tied to proposal acceptances?**
 - At this time, Common App is able to provide an honorarium of \$5,000 for each proposal accepted through this process. Teams will moreover have the full support of the Common App research team in applying for additional grant funding; past collaborators have been extremely successful in securing substantial additional financial support for their work in this way.
- **How many proposals will be accepted this year?**
 - While we do not have a fixed number of proposals we intend to accept through this process, this will be a **highly selective process**. For reference, we advanced fewer than 10% of all Letters of Intent we received last year onto the Semifinalist round. That being said, we were able to ultimately partner with 75% of all proposals reaching the Semifinalist round. To respect the time and energies of applicants, we have made the Letter of Intent round as light-lift as feasible.
- **Can researchers who submitted a proposal last year apply again?**
 - Absolutely yes, we invite and encourage all prior year participants to apply if they have exciting ideas they think would fit well with this year's theme! Please also feel free to re-use any materials from last year *without hesitation* if your prior proposal is relevant to this new theme.
- **If accepted, will we be able to link Common App data to other public or private sources of data?**
 - In general, additional data linkages are possible and in-scope, but will need to be handled on a case-by-case basis. Assume for your proposal that data linkages are possible, and we can explore the feasibility in the later stages if relevant.

- **What is the preferred format of citations or references for proposals?**
 - We do not have a strong preference, please use whatever conventions are most familiar and convenient for you.
- **Can an individual researcher be part of multiple different project proposal submissions?**
 - Yes, each project proposal will be taken on its own merits, irrespective of other proposals a researcher may be a part of.
- **I have a question about the feasibility/appropriateness/details of my specific proposal. Who can I ask for additional guidance on this or other aspects of the application process?**
 - While we cannot guarantee in-depth guidance to every interested team, we will make every effort to steer you in the right direction when possible! Please see the “Additional information” section below for instructions on how to get in touch.

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.