

# Innovations Guide

Summer 2025







Dear friends,

I'm excited to share with you our second annual Innovations Guide, which highlights the pilots, projects, and initiatives that are changing the postsecondary and admissions landscape.

This year, we're celebrating Common App's 50th anniversary. Fifty years ago, a group of visionary institutions came together with one goal: to make the college admissions process simpler and more accessible. Today, that same spirit of collaboration fuels everything we do at Common App. We've grown from a shared application into a national access movement, touching the lives of millions of students, educators, and institutions across the globe.

As we celebrate this milestone, we're not just honoring our past — we're looking to the future. Our moonshot goal to bring more students from low-and middle-income communities onto the application is a bold and ambitious one. But as you'll see in this guide, together, with our 1,100+ member institutions and hundreds of thousands of counselors and educators, we are building a system that expands possibilities and removes barriers.

We will continue to use this report to provide updates on all of the work Common App is doing throughout its Next Chapter.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Jenny Rickard". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Jenny Rickard**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Common App

**A group of colleges and universities came together in 1975 to streamline the college application process by creating a common application form for students.**

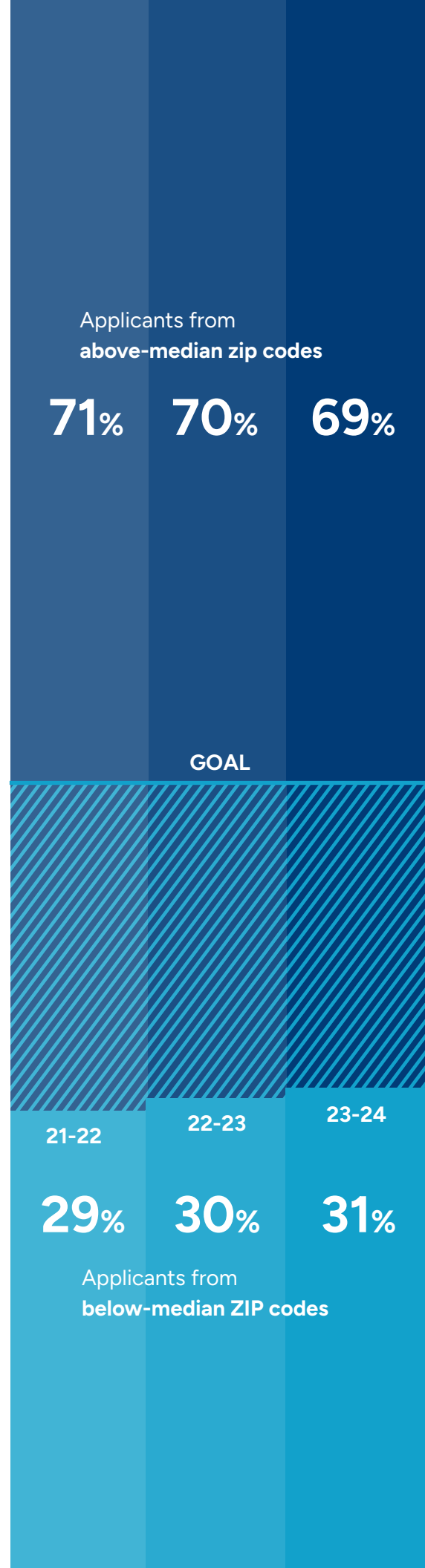
Nearly 50 years later, Common App continues to open doors to opportunity.

Since we started measuring our progress towards our moonshot goal in the 2021–2022 application season, **numbers show that our gaps in students coming from low- and middle-income communities using the Common App is steadily closing.**

But we know we have a long way to go. We've begun to expand our initiatives and we're coming up with new ways to help more students from low- and middle-income communities with their postsecondary goals.

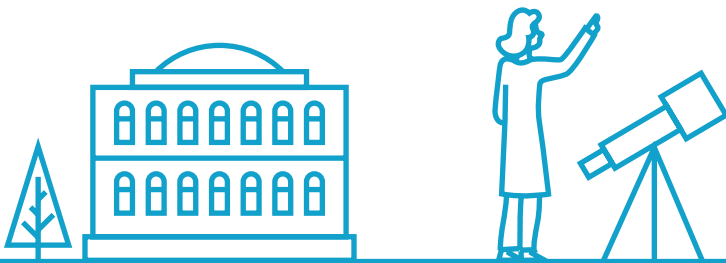
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*While Common App does not explicitly collect applicants' household income information, we supplement our understanding of the socioeconomic characteristics of applicants by examining characteristics of the communities in which they reside from the U.S. Census (for students residing in the United States). In alignment with broader higher education research practices, our past research work, and our Next Chapter, we track the number of applicants residing in a ZIP code with a median household income above or below the national median household income.*



# How we'll get there:

## Working towards our moonshot goal



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 help all students access, afford, and attain opportunity, especially those from low- and middle-income communities. We have several initiatives in flight that will help us reach our moonshot.



HOW WE'LL GET THERE: WORKING TOWARDS OUR MOONSHOT GOAL

# Reimagine college admissions to be more simple, logical, and joyful



# 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 that 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

In its second year as a full-scale program, Common App Direct Admissions partnered with 119 member institutions across 35 states to serve more than 700,000+ first-generation and low-income students.

**733,000+** students receiving offers  
**119** participating institutions



### Member college breakdown

**35** states      **27%** public institutions  
**31%** MSIs      **73%** private institutions

## IMPACTS

**22%** of students who received offers **added at least 1 college** they weren't already considering

**3 in 4** students who chose to add a college that sent them an offer ended up actually applying

**32%** higher application rates among students who received a direct admissions offer compared to those who did not

Students with greatest barriers (fee waiver eligible, first-generation) are **twice as likely to engage**

Students are most likely to respond to offers **<100 miles from home**

Students are most likely to respond to offers **sent before January 15**

## What's next

In the fall of 2025, we'll **launch the program with 200+ colleges and universities**, including community colleges. Changes to our Direct Admissions program include:

- An Overview section that provides information about the program, including the questions students need to answer to be eligible for direct admissions and how to take action on their offers
- Students will see perks associated with direct admissions offers in a "Quick View," enhancing the visibility of the benefits associated with direct admissions
- All information about a direct admissions offer will be shown within the dedicated direct admissions section, making it easier for students to navigate, compare, and engage with offers
- Offers will be sorted by state, with the student's home state shown first

## Student Context Inventory

### WHAT IT IS

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In partnership with Harvard Graduate School of Education's initiative, Making Caring Common, 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 their experiences like working at a paid job to support their family, living in an environment without reliable internet, interpreting or translating for household members, taking care of their siblings, and other responsibilities students might have.

### WHAT WE'VE SEEN SO FAR

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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 low-income and first-generation status.

↑ **31%** of all applicants on the Common App platform this past season encountered the Student Context Inventory question on a participating member's supplemental question screen (*up from 21%*) last year

↑ **65%** of students opted to respond to the question (*compared to a 60% response rate last year*)

↑ **19%** of applicants who saw the question provided four or more responses (*up from 14% last year*)

Applicants who selected seven or more response options were about **4.5x as likely** as non-responders to report being eligible for a Common App fee waiver.

### What's next

For the 2025–2026 application season, we are making the Student Context Inventory question part of the 'common' portion of the application. Now called the **'Responsibilities and Circumstances' question** in the Activities section, it will provide students with a non-intrusive way to share critical life experiences.

The pilot's findings reinforced the importance of giving students space—beyond the personal essay—to share how these factors have shaped their high school experience. It also helps students understand that colleges value this information.



## Dallas County Promise partnership

Reusing data to streamline college application and improve access

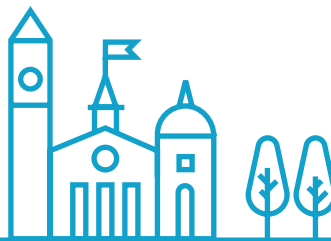
### WHAT IT IS

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Common App partnered with the Dallas County Promise network to enable students to easily create accounts and pre-fill the Common App with data from the form they complete to apply for the Dallas County Promise Program.

### What's next

Through this pilot, **we advanced equitable access to higher education by streamlining the college application process**—reducing data entry and making it easier for all students, especially those less resourced, to apply. It was a significant win for students. As we expand the pilot next year, we're building a more inclusive ecosystem by forging new and existing partnerships to reach students beyond our traditional networks.

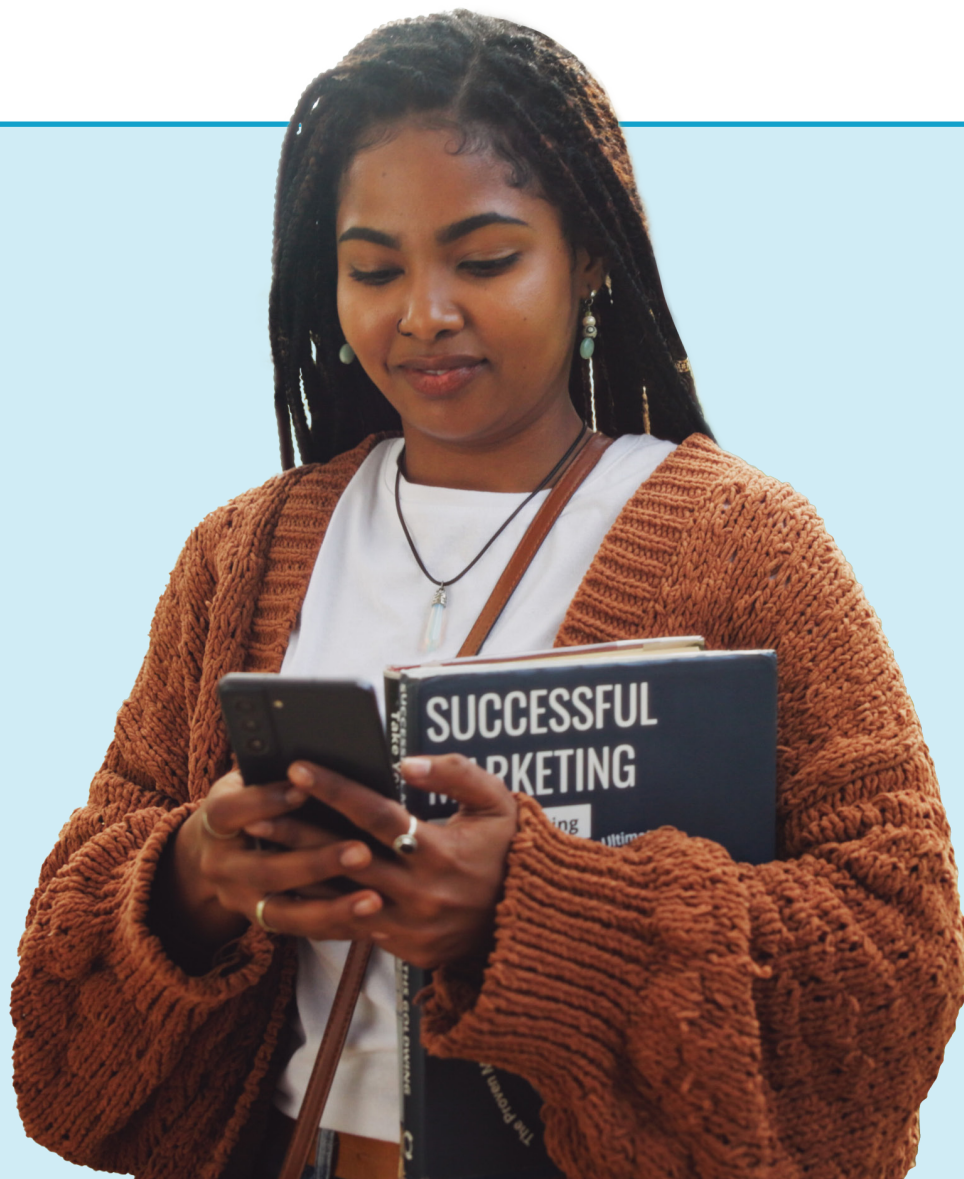


## Welcoming our first cohort of community colleges

This year, we welcomed our first cohort of community colleges to our platform. As part of Common App's Next Chapter, the organization recommitted to increasing access by closing the gap in low- and middle-income students applying through Common App. Expanding the opportunities available to students on the Common App is one of the many ways the organization is working toward that goal. While the organization has welcomed [Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges](#) to its membership before, **this is the first targeted effort to include colleges that offer primarily associate-level degrees.**

## Connect students to financial aid resources, information, and opportunities

We know affordability is one of the biggest barriers to college, especially for those who come from low-and middle-income families. To help more students from low-and middle-income communities reach their post-secondary goals, Common App is connecting college applicants with financial aid opportunities and upfront cost information.



# Connecting students to more scholarship opportunities

## WHAT IT IS

Through partnerships with **Scholarship America and the National Scholarship Providers Association**, our scholarships program connects students with scholarship opportunities they're eligible for based on their Common App data, helping scholarship partners better reach and serve underrepresented students.

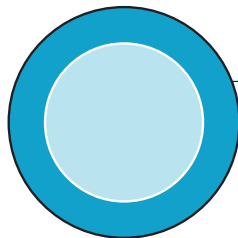
## WHAT WE'VE SEEN SO FAR

**89K**  **1.5M**  
23-24 24-25

By adding a new partnership with the National Scholarships Providers Association and making matching available to students before they submit an application, we expanded our reach from 89K students in 23–24 to **1.5M students in 24–25**.



Students matched with a median of **14 opportunities** in 24–25, up from 2 in 23–24.



We contributed to a **46% increase** in first-generation applicants to participating Scholarship America partners.



**First generation and below median income students were more likely** to act on their scholarship matches. 32% of all students acted on at least one match, compared to 37% of first generation and 38% of below median income students.



Participating Scholarship America partners awarded over **\$5.5M** to first-generation and low-income students whose decision to apply was likely influenced by Common App outreach.

## What's next

In the 2025–2026 application season, we'll continue notifying students directly in the application of scholarship opportunities they may be eligible to receive.

## HOW WE'LL GET THERE: WORKING TOWARDS OUR MOONSHOT GOAL

### Affordability resources

#### **FAFSA & Financial Aid Awareness**

Through outreach campaigns, partnerships, and digital resources, Common App helps students understand available aid.

### uAspire partnership

This year we hosted two Q&A sessions on Instagram Live with uAspire, centered around FAFSA completion and what comes after students submit the FAFSA and receive their aid offers. Those two sessions totaled 1,805 live views and provided students with key resources and answers to pressing questions. The sessions were also recorded and re-posted on Common App and uAspire social media channels, as well as the Common App YouTube channel as an evergreen resource for students.



## Scholarship applications on Common App



### **Davis New Mexico**

Common App partnered with the Davis New Mexico Scholarship (DNMS) to expand college access for first-generation and low-income students in New Mexico. The DNMS application is available through the Common Application platform, enabling students to apply for the scholarship through the same process they use to apply to colleges and universities nationwide.



### **Jack Kent Cooke Foundation**

Students can apply to Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's College Scholarship Program and Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship on Common App. These programs support high achieving students with financial need who seek to attend and graduate from the nation's best four-year colleges and universities.



### **Mitchell Institute**

Starting this fall, students will be able to apply to the Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship on Common App. Senator Mitchell founded the Mitchell Institute in 1995 to increase the likelihood that young people from Maine would achieve a college education. Each year, at least one graduate from every Maine public high school is awarded the Mitchell Scholarship: \$10,000 and ongoing support in college and beyond.



HOW WE'LL GET THERE: WORKING TOWARDS OUR MOONSHOT GOAL

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

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.

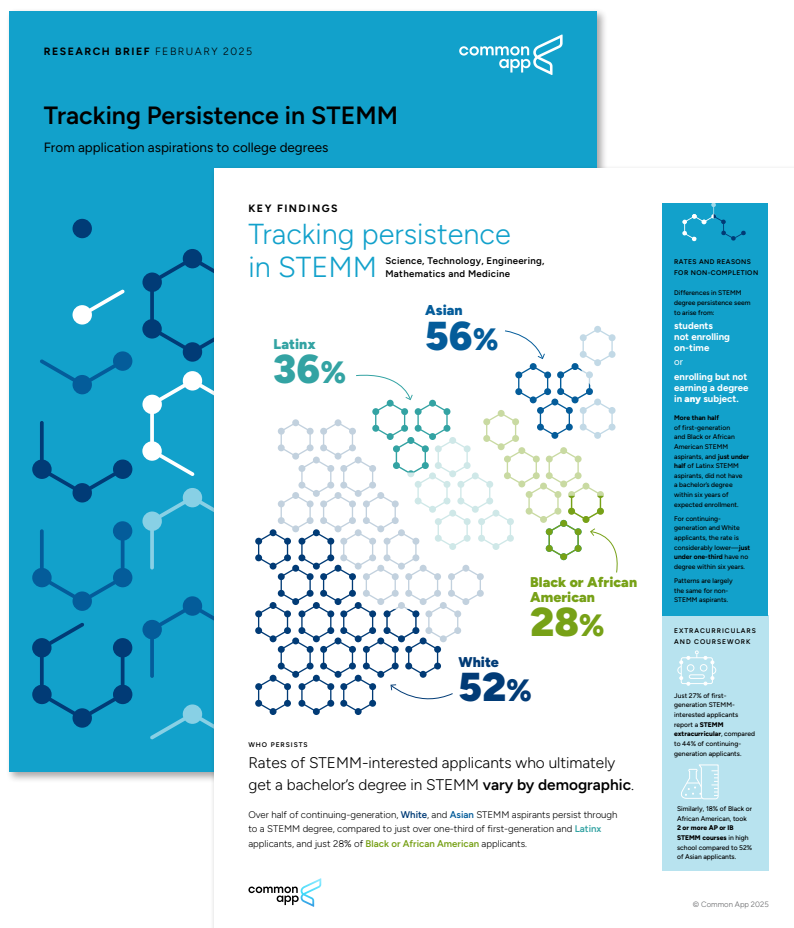


# Tracking persistence in STEMM: From application aspirations to college degrees

Using National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) StudentTracker records, we highlight a critical challenge in higher education in this brief: while more than half of college applicants express interest in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, medical) fields, many never earn any degree. Our analysis of nearly 800,000 students from the point of applying to college in the 2016-2017 academic year to completing degrees within the ensuing six years shows that the biggest barrier isn't just switching majors—it's persistence. Too many students start college with STEMM aspirations but don't make it to graduation.

## Some key findings:

- Over 50% of applicants express interest in STEMM—but far fewer earn a STEMM degree.
- The biggest drop-off happens when students leave college altogether before completing any degree.
- Even academically strong students often fail to persist, suggesting challenges beyond preparation.



## HOW WE'LL GET THERE: WORKING TOWARDS OUR MOONSHOT GOAL

### Independent students brief

We believe in expanding access and opportunity for all students—including those whose journeys might not follow “traditional” paths. In this brief, we explore more about independent students included in one or more of the following subgroups:

#### Independent households

Wards of the court or state, in legal guardianship, or do not reside with a parent, step-parent, or legal guardian.

#### Parenting students

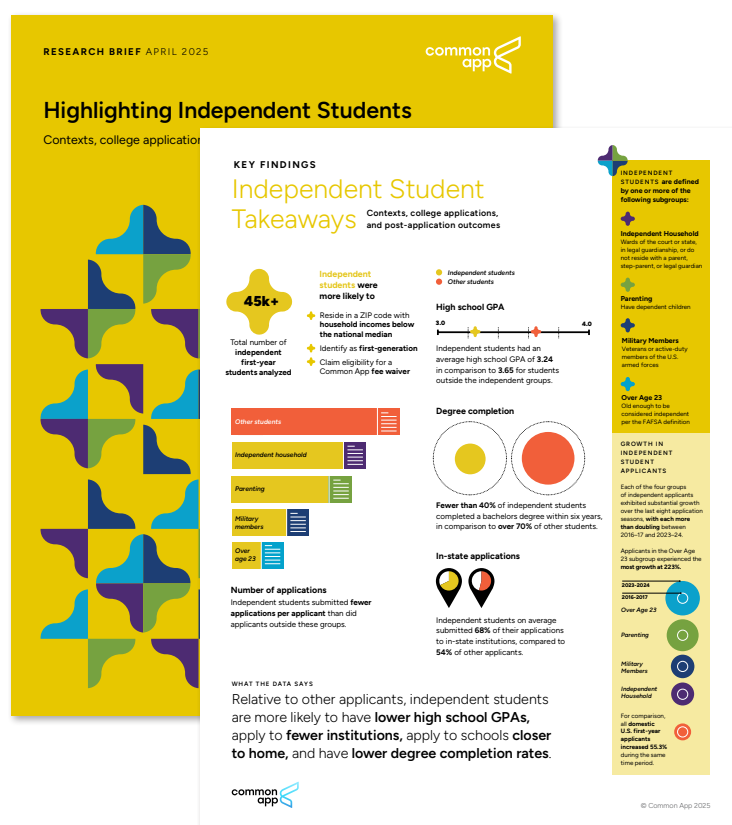
Have dependent children.

#### Military members

Veterans or active-duty members of the U.S. armed forces.

#### Students over the age of 23

Old enough to be considered independent per the FAFSA definition.



These students face unique challenges in addition to the demands of higher education, ranging from commitments at work or at home to dependent care responsibilities. Relative to other applicants, independent applicants outlined in the brief are **more likely to have lower high school GPAs, apply to fewer institutions, apply to schools closer to home, and have lower degree completion rates**, all indicating the need for unique resources and attention to support these students in their postsecondary journeys.

## Our first-ever call for research proposals

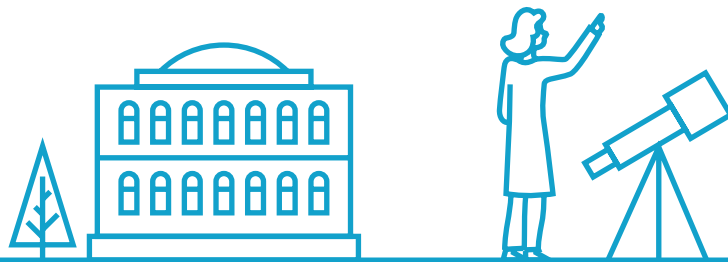
This year, we launched our first-ever call for research proposals from the broader social science research community. This new process is meant to mobilize new perspectives, skill sets, expertise, and resources. It aims to enrich our data insights, which we have shared over the last four years, and expand what we can learn from our data in service to the higher education community.

Our goal was to help advance our collective understanding of the relationship between students' high school contexts/communities and college access. We saw phenomenal interest from a wide variety of teams, institutions, and content areas, and are proud to kick off partnerships with three extremely exciting projects focused on counselor staffing policies, the role of geography in college access, and the exploration of college-going culture and preparedness among high schools across the country.



# 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 in flight that are helping to bring more low-and middle-income students onto the platform.



## Connecticut direct admissions partnership

Since 2023, we've partnered with the state of Connecticut through the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) to offer tens of 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.

### CAAP results (Through May 1, 2025)

**19,401** unique students received a CAAP offer from the 9 participating institutions

**172,798** total offers provided to students

**56,921** total applications

**8,864** unique applicants

## Illinois Board of Higher Education partnership

This year, Common App launched a partnership with the state of Illinois through its **One Click College Admit program** to offer thousands of high school seniors and community college transfer students in the state direct admissions. One Click College Admit is Illinois' free, quick, and stress-free direct admissions program into the state's participating universities. With only their GPA and permanent home address, students are directly admitted to one or more Illinois public universities and their local community college.

### One Click College Admit program results (Through May 1, 2025)

**65,149** unique students received an IL offer from the 8 participating institutions

**458,688** total offers provided to students

**4,654** total applications

**3,057** unique applicants

This innovative work would not be possible without the \$1 million in grant funding we've received this year.\* We are grateful to all of our partners for helping us continue increasing access for students from low-and middle-income communities, and help them overcome barriers to college.

Views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the funders.

**Gates Foundation**

**THE  
KRESGE  
FOUNDATION**