

Innovations Guide

Summer 2026







Dear friends,

As we close out Common App's 50th anniversary celebration, I have been struck by both how much has changed and how much remains the same.

Five decades ago, a group of colleges and universities came together around a simple idea: make the college application process simpler for students. Since then, millions of students have used Common App to pursue their educational goals, and our mission has remained the same: to expand access to opportunity.

That mission feels especially urgent today. Too many students, particularly those from low- and middle-income communities, continue to face barriers to higher education. That's why Common App has committed to an ambitious moonshot goal: closing the gap in students from low- and middle-income communities accessing postsecondary opportunity.

Progress toward that goal requires innovation, partnership, and a willingness to rethink how students discover, apply to, and pay for college. Throughout this guide, you'll see examples of that work in action—from direct admissions and state partnerships to affordability initiatives, research, and new ways of helping students share their experiences and strengths.

The progress highlighted in these pages reflects the collective efforts of our member institutions, counselors, educators, partners, and supporters. Together, we're building on 50 years of impact while creating new pathways to opportunity for the next generation of students.

Thank you for being part of this work.

Warmly,

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

Jenny Rickard
Chief Executive Officer
Common App

COMMON APP AND ITS NEXT CHAPTER

Common App started as an idea in 1975 with 15 colleges and universities coming together to try and simplify the application process.

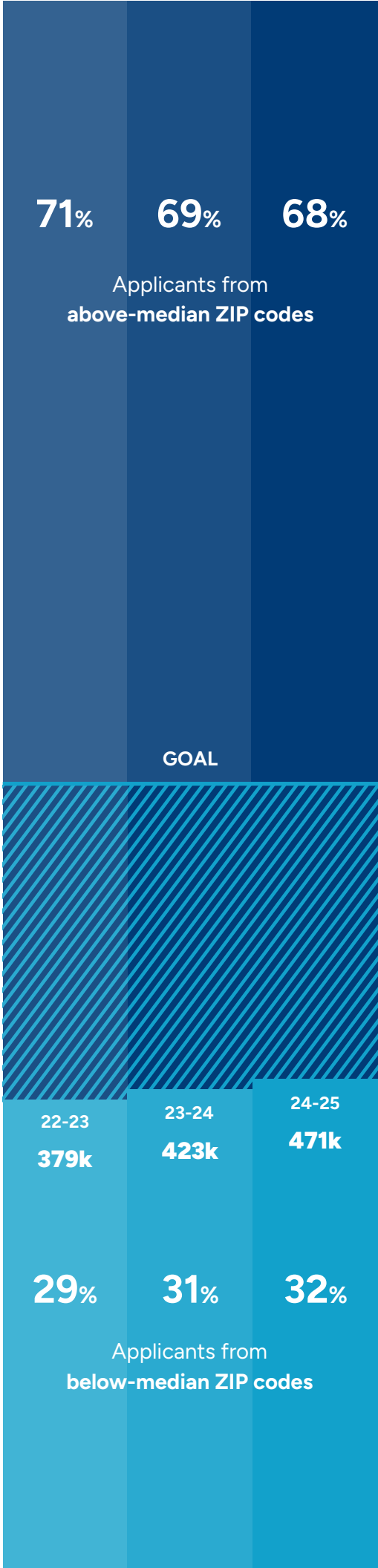
Over 50 years later, Common App serves over 1.5 million students every year, unlocking opportunity to over 1,100 colleges and universities.

Still, students from lower-income communities continue to face barriers throughout the college-going journey.

In 2023, Common App launched its Next Chapter with one goal in mind: to close the gap in students from low- and middle-income communities using Common App.

Since we started measuring our progress towards our moonshot goal in the 2022-2023 application season, numbers show that our gap in low- and middle-income students using the Common App is steadily closing.

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.



How we're working to **Scale our progress**



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, and we're seeing real results.

HOW WE'RE WORKING TO SCALE OUR PROGRESS

Flipping the script on the admissions process to expand access



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 low- and middle-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

In its third year as a full-scale program, Common App Direct Admissions grew from 119 to 215 participating member institutions across 41 states and Washington D.C. to serve more than 820,000 first-generation and low- and middle-income students.

820,000+ students receiving offers
215 participating institutions



Member college breakdown

42
states



26% public institutions
74% private institutions

40% of students who received offers added at least 1 college they weren't already considering to their college list.

25% of students who received an offer applied to at least 1 offering institution that they were not already considering.

That number is up from 17% in the 2024-25 season.

Students with greatest barriers (fee waiver eligible, first-generation) are **nearly 2x as likely to apply to an offering institution.**

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

What's next

In the fall of 2026, we'll launch our program with more than 230 colleges and universities, including community colleges. We're seeing real impact from this program, and the more institutions that adopt this model, the further it will expand opportunities for students who face the greatest barriers to higher education.



“

It has introduced me to colleges I'd never heard of before. It is encouragement and motivation for me to succeed and value academic excellence.

Hailey Melendez
Prospective nursing major

HOW WE'RE WORKING TO SCALE OUR PROGRESS

Addressing affordability head on

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 reach their postsecondary goals, Common App is connecting college applicants with financial aid opportunities and upfront cost information.



In-app scholarship matching

WHAT IT IS

As students complete their first-year application, they are automatically matched with scholarships they may be eligible for based on their Common App data. This accomplishes two things at once: Completing the application itself, and connecting with scholarship opportunities that may be a strong fit. This helps students address the potential affordability challenges that often prevent them from taking the steps needed to apply to college. This is only possible through our partnerships with the National Scholarship Providers Association (NSPA) and Scholarship America.

WHAT WE'VE SEEN SO FAR

Streamlining this process for students makes them far more likely to be aware of scholarship opportunities and engage with them. We know affordability remains one of the greatest barriers for students seeking higher education, and connecting them directly in one place with a way to lower financial burdens is a key to progressing towards our moonshot goal.

WHAT CHANGED IN 2025–2026

This past application season, Common App launched **scholarship matching earlier in the cycle**. We also allowed students to see more details about their scholarship matches, including program descriptions, requirements, and need/merit opportunities. This helps address feedback we've seen directly from students since last cycle desiring more information about their matches. This year's program also featured over **1,900 scholarships**, up from 1,200 the previous year. **Greater than 80% of these programs added were local opportunities**, specific to students' city, high school, or state.



THE RESULTS



1.5M+ students were matched with at least one scholarship opportunity



552K+ students acted on at least one scholarship opportunity (Up 16.8%)



The count of below-median income students who acted on an opportunity is **up by 28% over last year**



The first-generation applicant pool to participating scholarships was **61% higher** than it would have been without Common App outreach



\$4.2M awarded to first-generation and students from low-income communities through our Scholarship America partnership

HOW WE'RE WORKING TO SCALE OUR PROGRESS

Cost insight pilot

WHAT IT IS

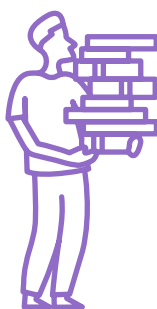
Based on guidance from financial aid leaders at our member institutions, we identified an opportunity to support early and simple college cost estimation. We established partnerships with two organizations supporting early cost estimation. MyinTuition, which supports instant estimation of net price based on income and family size. Meadow Net Price, which improves the traditional net price calculator by enabling quick estimates with only a few data points that students can refine.

WHAT WE'VE SEEN SO FAR

We engaged 24 member colleges and universities using these tools and emailed high school juniors who had added these colleges on Common App to encourage them to estimate their costs through these tools.



We reached 34,820 high school juniors.
Of those students:



25.3% were fee waiver-eligible

28.9% were from below-median income ZIP codes

36.3% were first-generation

Engagement rates are comparable to engagement with scholarship emails in our early pilot.

What's next

We're closely monitoring impact on student application behaviors based on interaction with this data. We plan to expand on this pilot next year, by exploring opportunities to connect to cost insight tools directly in the application.

Affordability resources

FAFSA & Financial Aid Awareness

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

We also implemented a new pattern to match fee-waiver eligible students with the Pell grant in-app as a scholarship opportunity. This prompted a **12% increase** in action rates over prior FAFSA messaging over campaigns that shared basic resources.

Scholarship partners

Common App hosts multiple scholarship applications directly on its platform.



What's next

For the 2026-27 application season, we are continuing our programs and scaling our partnerships in affordability initiatives.



HOW WE'RE WORKING TO SCALE OUR PROGRESS

Understanding and supporting students beyond their academic backgrounds

Students' lives and experiences extend far beyond grades, test scores, and extracurricular activities. Many balance significant responsibilities at home, at work, and within their communities—experiences that can shape their educational journeys but are not always visible through traditional application materials.



Responsibilities and circumstances

Allowing students to share the full picture of who they are

WHAT IT IS

To help students share these important aspects of their lives, Common App partnered with Making Caring Common at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to develop the Student Context Inventory. The optional, checklist-style question gave students an opportunity to identify responsibilities and circumstances that may have influenced their academic experience, including caring for family members, working to support their household, navigating limited access to resources, translating for family members, and other significant life experiences.

WHAT CHANGED

In 2025-26, Common App made this a permanent part of the first-year application, calling it the **responsibilities and circumstances** section. This section provides an explicit opportunity for students to share more about their lived experiences and the factors that contribute to their academic lives, without forcing them to use their personal essay to share these experiences.

What's next

This will continue to be a part of the application in 2026-27, and Common App will conduct and publish research on how students are interacting with the section and what it can tell us about the state of access as a whole.

THE RESULTS

Over half of all applicants have responded to at least one of the listed prompts

Responders are significantly more likely to be first-generation applicants, and the likelihood increases as more responses are selected



73% of applicants who responded to seven or more of the prompts are first-gen. **Only 40% of total applicants are first-gen.**



28% of applicants who responded to 7 or more prompts are international applicants. **Only 9.7% of total applicants are international students.**

HOW WE'RE WORKING TO SCALE OUR PROGRESS

Research into independent transfer students and first-generation students

In 2025-26, Common App used its unique data warehouse to publish research reports centered around how first-generation students, independent students, and transfer students apply to, enroll in, and ultimately complete their higher education program. By studying emerging trends and populations that are often overlooked, we can help institutions, policymakers, and practitioners make more informed decisions and develop more effective support for students.

Independent transfer students

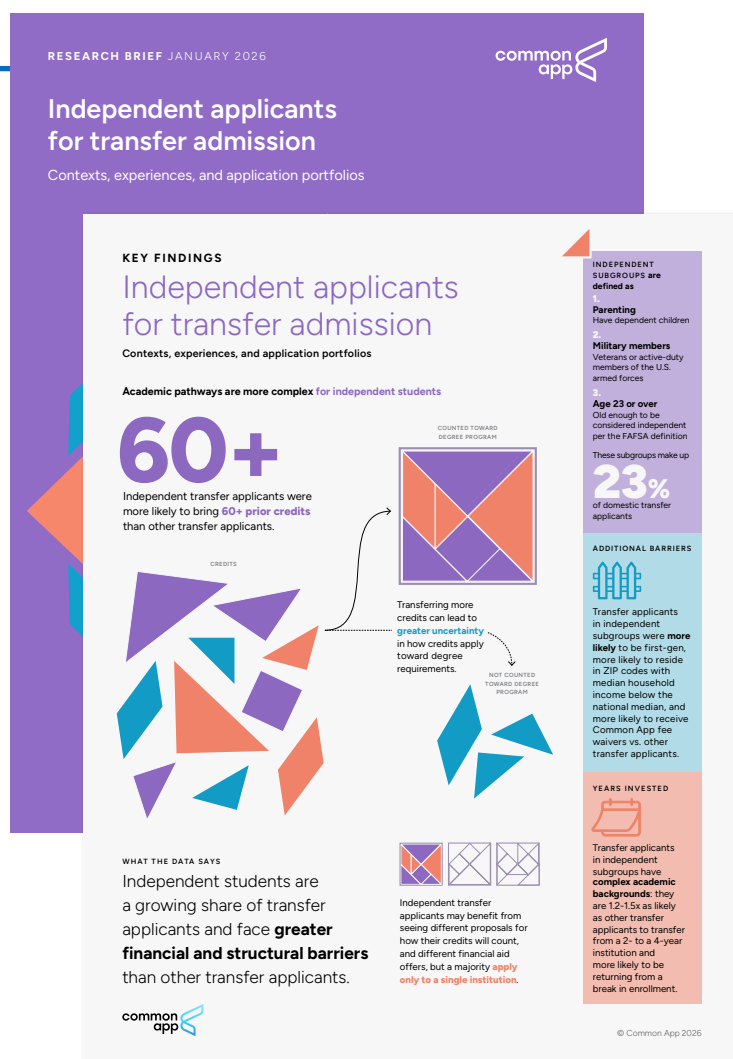
Understanding nontraditional pathways

WHY IT MATTERS

Independent students, including **parenting students, military-affiliated students, students over age 23, and those living independently from parents or guardians**, are often from below-median income ZIP codes and balance significant responsibilities while pursuing higher education.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- ◆ Independent transfer students **apply to fewer institutions** than their peers.
- ◆ They are more likely to **stay closer to home**.
- ◆ They face unique **financial, family, and work-related challenges**.
- ◆ They are often **bringing more credits from past institutions**.



First-generation students

Common App published two research briefs centered around first-gen students, as they are far more likely to come from low- and middle-income communities

WHY IT MATTERS

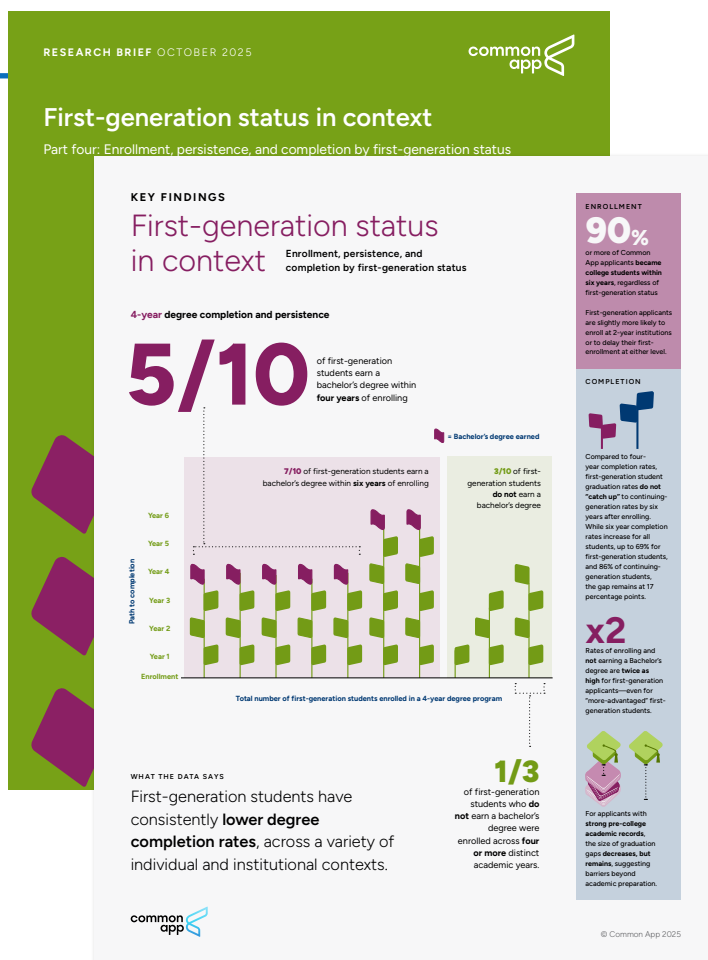
Our research dove into **enrollment and completion outcomes for first-gen students**, as well as how looking at students' parents' education by both parents and not just the higher educated one led to key differences in outcomes.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- ◆ About 90% of Common App applicants enrolled in college within six years, and **this holds true for both continuing- and first-generation students.**
- ◆ First-generation students have lower completion rates than their continuing-generation peers: **Four years after starting at a 4-year institution, about half of first-generation students had earned a Bachelor's degree, compared to 68% of continuing-generation students** – an 18 percentage point gap.

Outcomes considering both parents' education:

- ◆ **Parental education combinations provide critical nuance masked by traditional binary first and continuing-generation definitions.** While having parents with higher levels of education



is associated with higher enrollment, persistence and graduation rates, there is substantial overlap between applicants considered "first" and "continuing-generation."

- ◆ The standard first-generation definition groups together students with a 58% completion rate alongside those with a 78% rate, a 20-point range in outcomes that likely reflects different college experiences shaped by differences in parent resources. **Similarly, continuing-generation degree completion rates span between 70% and 92%, a 22-point range.**

HOW WE'RE WORKING TO SCALE OUR PROGRESS

Growing our impact through collaboration and policy innovation

In addition to Common App Direct Admissions initiative, Common App has also partnered with the states of Illinois and Connecticut to offer direct admissions. These partnerships expand the impact of the program, and allows institutions to directly reach the students in their states, as well as provide these students the confidence and information they need to take the next step without the anxiety of rejection plaguing the process.



One Click College Admit

The Illinois “One Click College Admit” program is built on the success of using the Common App as an application platform for all public universities in the state. Through One Click, Illinois high school seniors entering their GPA into Common App were automatically offered admission to participating Illinois public universities and community colleges based on GPA alone. Students received and acted on admissions offers right in Common App.

In 2025-26, Illinois’ “One Click College Admit” initiative resulted in:



69,000+

offers sent to seniors

33% of those students accepted an offer from at least one institution

First-generation and low- and middle-income seniors were 2x more likely to accept an offer over those not identified as first-gen, low- to middle-income.

What’s next

This year and moving forward, Illinois community colleges will also participate in the program.



Connecticut Automatic Admissions Program

The Connecticut Automatic Admission Program (CAAP) is a statewide initiative established in 2022 to expand postsecondary access and simplify the path to college for Connecticut’s high school seniors.

In its second year, CAAP made a few key changes that increased its impact dramatically, namely, changing the eligibility requirement from percentiles to GPA, and sending out offers earlier in the season.

The program saw similar impacts in 2025-26:



150,000+

offers sent to 17,000+ seniors

34% of students receiving offers applied to at least one offering institution that they were not already considering (**up from 27% last year**)

First-generation and low-and middle-income seniors were 2x more likely to apply to offering institutions

The success of these state partnerships support our efforts to expand our impact through collaboration. The moonshot will require expansion and the combination of efforts from multiple organizations and systems.

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It’s kind of nerve-racking because, of course, the anxiety is like, ‘I don’t know if I’m going to make it, even though I had the GPA for it, I had everything I needed’, but it was like “Yes! I made it!”

Brianna Renna

HOW WE'RE WORKING TO SCALE OUR PROGRESS

Meeting students where they are: Leveraging social media to connect with students

We know that the large majority of our first-year applicants are applying for enrollment the fall after their high school graduations. Many of these students get much of their information from social media and short-form video. In 2025-26, Common App made it a priority to reach more students and those supporting them on social media to spread accurate information and opportunities. This has led to a significant rise in engagement on its social media platforms.



In 2025-26, Common App reached more students through social media



Over 5 million impressions across all platforms (Compared to 700K in 2024)

Gained over **16,000 followers** across all platforms

Over **229,000 engagements** across all platforms (Compared to 16,000 in 2024)

Common App content reached over **3 million accounts** across all platforms (Compared to 537K in 2024)

Part of this effort included welcoming Common App's first cohort of student content creators. These students are actively on college campuses **sharing their experiences and their advice with students currently going through the application process** via short form video on Common App's Instagram and TikTok channels.

Since the program started in April 2026 we've created 40 pieces of content and garnered:



Over **330,000** impressions



Over **326,000** video views



19,000 engagements

Digital advertising to reach students

Common App executed targeted digital advertising campaigns from Feb 2026–June 30, 2026 designed to reach rising seniors, community college, transfer and moonshot students where they spend time online, including Google, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit and YouTube.



Across Common App's Moonshot Student, Rising Seniors, and Community College paid media campaigns, digital advertising efforts generated more than **over 8 million impressions and 500,000 clicks to Common App resources, and sent more than 27,400 students to create Common App accounts.** The campaigns achieved an overall **8.67% click-through rate** demonstrating strong performance in reaching prospective students and driving meaningful engagement with Common App resources and account creation opportunities.

We will use this pilot program to inform a full year of paid advertising programs for FY27.



This innovative work would not be possible without the over \$2.75M million in grant funding we've received throughout the last few years. 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.

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