

Advancing equitable scholarship awarding through scholarship outreach partnerships

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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 the 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.

In this research brief, we are excited to share our learnings from one branch of this financial aid work that we've been conducting in partnership with [Scholarship America](#) and Equitable, a leading financial services organization and principal franchise of Equitable Holdings, Inc. (NYSE: EQH), who provides the annual "Equitable Excellence Scholarship," a flagship program of Equitable

Foundation, the company's charitable-giving arm. Over the past several years, we have been connecting underrepresented students on our platform to private scholarship opportunities for which they'd be particularly competitive.

Our major motivation for this work is driven by prior research showing that White, affluent students are significantly more likely to receive private scholarship funding (NPSAS). At the same time, Black, Latino, and Indigenous students with high financial need benefit most from scholarship aid in terms of improving bachelor's degree completion rates ([Blueprint Labs](#)). Together, these findings call us to ask: how can we support getting these private scholarship funds to students who'd benefit most?

In this brief, we'll share learnings from the first chapter of this work, where we leveraged email outreach to connect low-income and underrepresented students to scholarship opportunities. We've since expanded this work to provide students a tailored in-app scholarship experience, which we will detail in an upcoming brief.

This brief focuses on our work with Scholarship America and the Equitable Excellence Scholarship in the 2022-2023 application season. Using a careful combination of intensive partnership work, targeted and tailored email outreach, and rigorous evaluation methods, we were ultimately able to:

1. Greatly increase the application rates of underrepresented students to this competitive, high-value scholarship administered by Scholarship America;
2. Greatly increase the diversity of their applicant pool; and
3. Increase the number of scholarship dollars that our underrepresented applicants received by a total of over \$350,000 over four years.

In the remainder of this brief, we explain the goals and structure of this scholarship email outreach work, describe the full details of our results, and preview the model we developed for the 2023-2024 application season, synthesizing key takeaways for the field to expand affordability for students who need it the most.

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Key findings

1. Students were extremely engaged in our email outreach related to financial affordability options: **70.1% of students receiving emails opened them, with 7.4% of them clicking-through to take action.** This indicates to us both that we can be a trusted source for students in this arena, and also that students are clearly interested in this sort of information.
2. Our emails were extremely successful in driving underrepresented students to apply who likely would not have applied otherwise. **Students receiving our email outreach were more than twice as likely to apply to the Equitable Excellence Scholarship program** than similar students we did not email.
3. These students were also much more likely to receive the scholarship, receiving the scholarship at over twice the rate of similar students we did not email conditional on applying. **Our outreach thus significantly increased the amount of scholarship dollars that these underrepresented students received – by over \$350,000 total –** and represents an important break from the status quo of private scholarship aid.
4. Our outreach also increased the diversity of both the applicant and recipient pool for the scholarship provider, indicating that this kind of partnership can help those providers reach underrepresented students they might not otherwise be able to. For example, **our email outreach caused a 12% increase in the size of their first-generation applicant pool, and a 13% increase in the size of their URM applicant pool.**
5. Finally, this work shows that **partnerships are essential to advancing more equitable private scholarship awarding practices.** While Common App was successful in driving diverse applicant pools for participating scholarship programs, Scholarship America's work to implement revised scoring models with the Equitable Excellence Scholarship program was an equally critical ingredient in shifting funding to racially underrepresented students with high financial need.
6. Informed by the success of our email outreach, **in the 2023-2024 application season, we expanded our participating partners and piloted a tailored in-app scholarship experience.** Our goal was to create even stronger student engagement, enabling greater impact going forward. We look forward to sharing program results from the 2023-2024 application season soon.

Scholarship email outreach goals and process

For the 2022-2023 application season, our primary objectives in our scholarship outreach work with Scholarship America were two-fold:

1. Examine the extent to which receiving emails from Common App drives underrepresented students to apply who would not have otherwise, and
2. Examine the impact of Common App outreach on the diversity of scholarship providers' applicant and recipient pools.

To accomplish these goals with our outreach program, we first worked closely with administrators of the Equitable Excellence Scholarship to better understand their criteria for both eligibility and selection (with selection being a particularly important element, as we'll discuss in more detail later). This way, we could start by identifying which Common App applicants coming from an underrepresented background would be a good fit for their criteria.

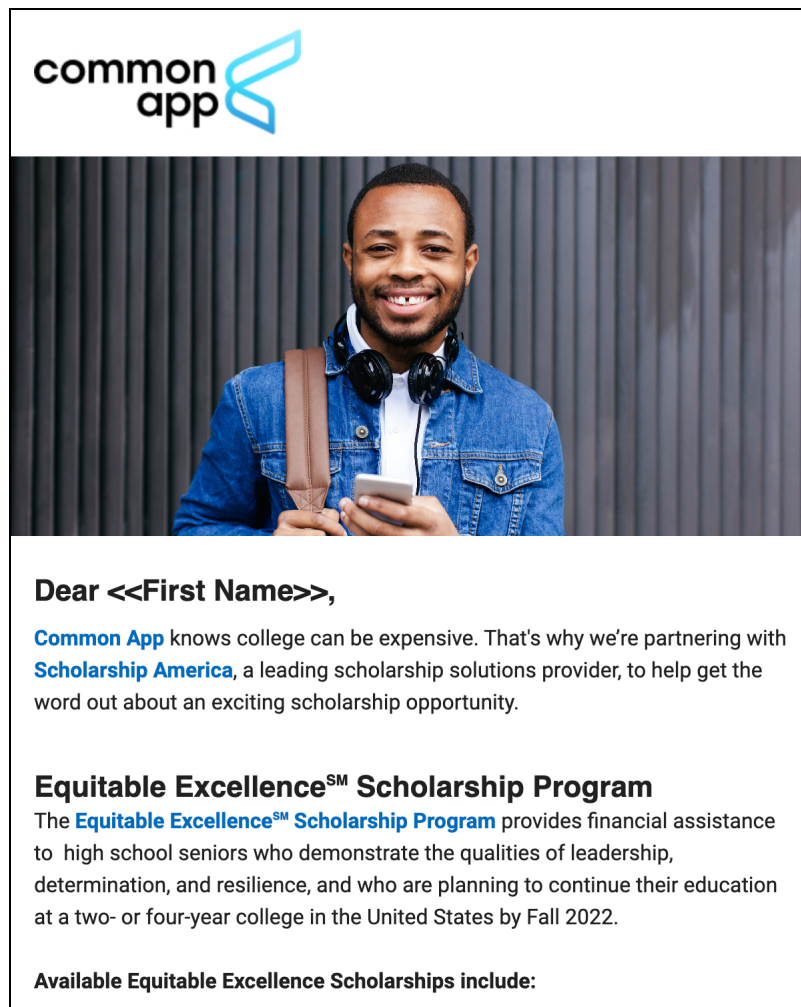
As context, the Equitable Excellence Scholarship is the flagship program of Equitable Foundation, the company's charitable-giving arm. The scholarship program includes renewable scholarships and engagement to create pathways to opportunities for aspiring college students. To support students throughout their academic journeys, Equitable provides 100 \$5,000 annual scholarships that will be renewed to award recipients each academic year for four years, for a total of \$20,000 per recipient. The company also awards 100 one-time \$2,500 scholarships that can help students to underwrite immediate costs associated with higher education such as tuition, books or room and board. A distilled description of the scholarship requirements, deadlines, awards, and targeting criteria (i.e., our shared operationalization of underrepresented) are displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Scholarship partner program details

Scholarship	Main requirements	Award details	Common App targeting criteria
Equitable Excellence Scholarship Deadline: 12/16/2022	Students must be a high school senior in United States and Puerto Rico	- \$20,000 (\$5,000/yr for up to 4 years) OR \$2,500 (one-time) - 200 total recipients	- Indicated that they were a first-generation college student - AND Self-identified as a URM race/ethnicity - AND Indicated eligibility for a Common App fee waiver

With this information in hand, we could identify the full set of eligible Common App students who had submitted a complete college application. Our intention was then to send a series of three timely, informational emails about the scholarship opportunity to these students, providing basic information about how to apply, eligibility criteria, and more. The first email would be sent about one month from the deadline, the second email would be sent about two weeks from the deadline, and the final email would be sent the week of the deadline. The idea was that providing these students with this information would increase their awareness of this substantial financial aid opportunity and encourage them to apply. An example of what these emails looked like for students is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Scholarship informational email example



Importantly, we wanted to ensure that we were gathering as much rigorous data and evidence as possible about the actual impact of this outreach on the end goal of diversifying scholarship applicants and recipients. To that end, we conducted our outreach using a framework known as a “randomized controlled trial.” In essence, we wanted to learn as concretely as possible: what is the actual impact of receiving emails from us on applying for, and receiving, a scholarship? In order to know this, we needed to compare the group of students who *did* receive email outreach from us (a “treated” group) against a truly comparable group of students who *didn’t* receive email outreach from us (a “control” group).

To compare this group of students to those who didn’t receive an email, we took the full set of eligible students for each scholarship and randomly selected a small subset of them to *not* receive any email communications (essentially a lottery system). We could then use this group as the direct and reliable comparison for students who *did* receive the email communication on average – because the only thing that made these two groups of students different was the luck of the draw.

Ultimately, we identified 46,573 eligible students for the Equitable Excellence Scholarship, of whom 41,915 (90%) were randomized into actually receiving email notifications from us, while 4,658 (10%) were randomized into the control group with no email notifications. Note that we also identified an additional 33,523 eligible students for our other partner scholarship, of which 29,165 (90%) were randomized into the treatment group, and 4,358 were randomized into the control group. This made for a total of 71,080 distinct students receiving our outreach in the 2022-2023 application cycle.

With the target students identified, the informational material for the emails drafted and refined, and the carefully scheduled email campaigns on the way, we then needed to await application and recipient data from our scholarship partners to learn the impacts of our work.

Email outreach results and impact

Impact of email outreach on scholarship application and receipt

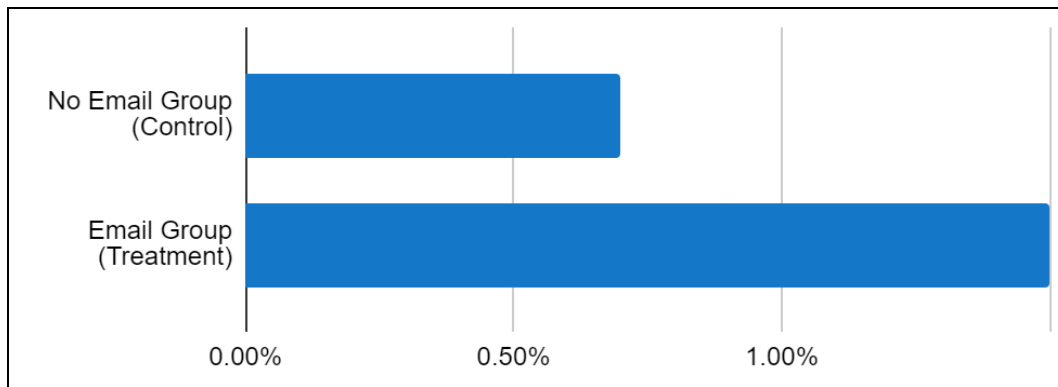
Once the scholarship partner had finished their application cycle and made their award decisions, we analyzed their application data against ours to understand the impacts of our outreach.

First, we examined whether our email outreach made students more likely to apply for and receive the Equitable Excellence Scholarship. In general, email engagement among students who received them was extremely high: 70.1% of students receiving emails from Common App about the Equitable Excellence Scholarship

opened them. We see that these open-rates also resulted in relatively high click-through rates at 7.4%. These email engagement rates make clear that students were interested in the information we were providing regarding scholarships.

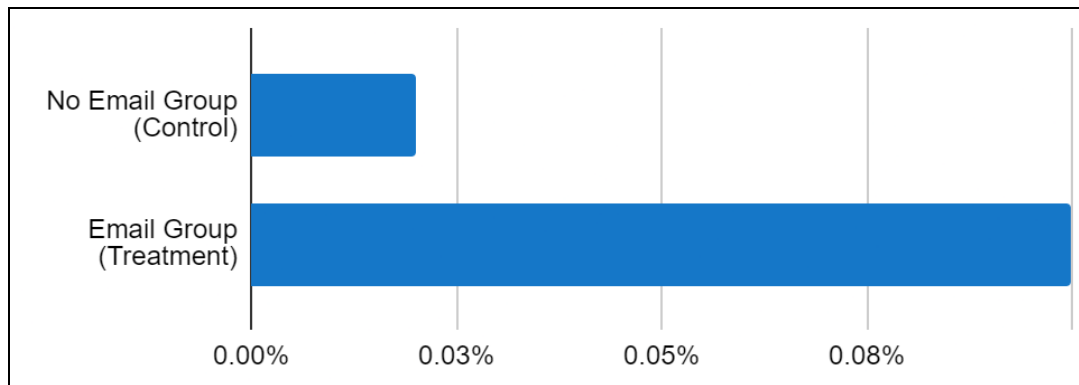
In terms of actual application behavior following the email, we find strong evidence that students seemed to react meaningfully to the email in Figure 2. For the Equitable Excellence Scholarship, only 0.7% of students in the non-emailed group chose to apply; by contrast, **emailed students applied at over twice that rate at 1.5%**. These data points combined provide us with clear evidence that students could be encouraged to apply for these relevant scholarships through our targeted outreach.

Figure 2. Rate of students applying to the Equitable Excellence Scholarship, by email receipt group



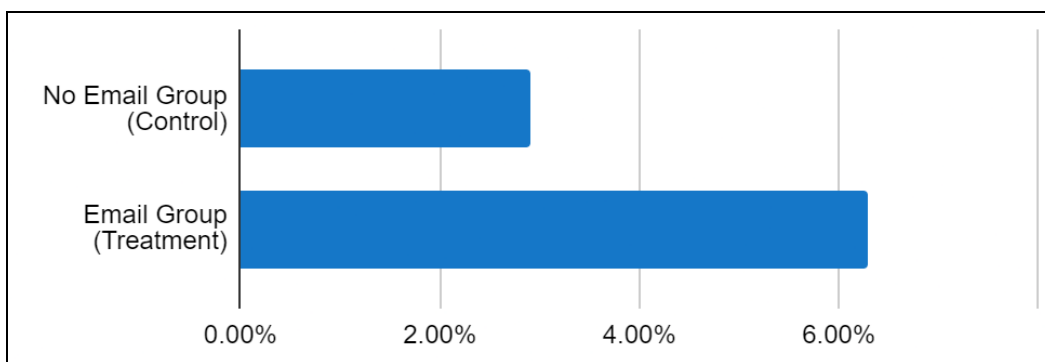
But what happens to students after they apply? Do they actually receive the scholarship? We can think of this in two separate ways. In Figure 3, we find that among *all* students in our sample (whether they applied for the scholarship or not), **the overall rate of receipt was 0.02% among non-emailed students – and 5x as high at 0.1% among emailed students**. In other words, emailed students were in general far more likely to receive the scholarship overall.

Figure 3. Overall rate of students receiving the Equitable Excellence Scholarship, by email receipt group



If we instead focus only on the students who actually applied for the scholarship in each group in Figure 4, we find that 2.9% of non-emailed students who applied ended up receiving the scholarship. By contrast, 6.3% of emailed students who applied received it (or an increase of 117%). This makes clear that the **students who applied only because of the email we sent were actually more competitive for the scholarship** than students who applied on their own volition (as indicated by the non-emailed group).

Figure 4. Rate of students receiving the Equitable Excellence Scholarship conditional on applying, by email receipt group



Moreover, from this statistic we can use some back-of-the-envelope math to find that students in the emailed group received a total of over \$350,000 more in scholarship funds via the Equitable Excellence Scholarship than they would have received in the absence of our outreach (again, using the control group rates as a comparable benchmark). Per our main motivation for this work, this is a meaningful

boost of scholarship funds to underrepresented students that are otherwise not often applying to these scholarships they're competitive for and would benefit from.

These statistics for the Equitable Excellence Scholarship are particularly heartening in the context of results from the 2021-2022 year intervention work, and highlight one of the most important learnings from this cycle. In the prior year of this same intervention using a similar design, we found that students we emailed about the Equitable Excellence Scholarship had a rate of receipt conditional on applying of only 0.6%, or only 2 scholarships awarded out of the 316 students who applied following our outreach. In other words, while we were successful in getting underrepresented students to apply to the Equitable Excellence Scholarship in the 2021-2022 season, we weren't nearly as successful in helping these students actually receive scholarship awards.

Table 2. Email-to-receipt funnel for the Equitable Excellence Scholarship across years

	Students Emailed	Applications Submitted by Emailed Students	Awards Received by Emailed Students	Receipt Rate Conditional on Applying
Equitable Excellence Scholarship (2021-2022)	35,400	316	2	0.6%
Equitable Excellence Scholarship (2022-2023)	41,915	638	40	6.3%

Upon review with Equitable and Scholarship America, we found that this was largely because the selection rubrics used by the Equitable Excellence Scholarship program strongly prioritized academics, which was not an explicit eligibility criteria in our email outreach targeting. Based upon this result, Scholarship America worked with Equitable to develop a new selection rubric that prioritized high financial need more strongly.

In the 2022-2023 season, as a result of this coordinated effort, the rate of receipt conditional on applying for our referred students is now over ten times as high, and twenty times the number of students we referred ultimately received the Equitable Excellence Scholarship over last year. This speaks to the critical importance and potential of using deliberate and careful partner work, alignment in goals and

processes, and thoughtful research and data insights, together to help shift systems towards greater equity.

Impact of email outreach on scholarship applicant pool diversity

In addition to seeing how students responded specifically to the email outreach in the randomized-controlled design, we also wanted to understand the extent to which the students we referred to the Equitable Excellence Scholarship helped meaningfully change the demographics of their applicant pool. In other words, did our outreach allow the scholarship provider to see more underrepresented students in the selection pool, relative to those they see from business-as-usual marketing and outreach of their own?

We found that students we referred to their applicant pool were **more than three times as likely to be first-generation**, and **nearly three times as likely to identify as an underrepresented racial/ethnic minority** than applicants they received through other means. Put another way, our email outreach caused a 12% increase in the size of their first-generation applicant pool, and a 13% increase in the size of their URM applicant pool. Similarly, our applicants' average reported Suggested Parent Contribution (a measure indicating how much money a family can likely contribute to college costs, where lower values indicate higher financial need) was about \$2,719 versus the rest of their applicants' average of \$19,324.

Figure 5. Percent of Equitable Excellence Scholarship applicants identifying as first-generation by referral source

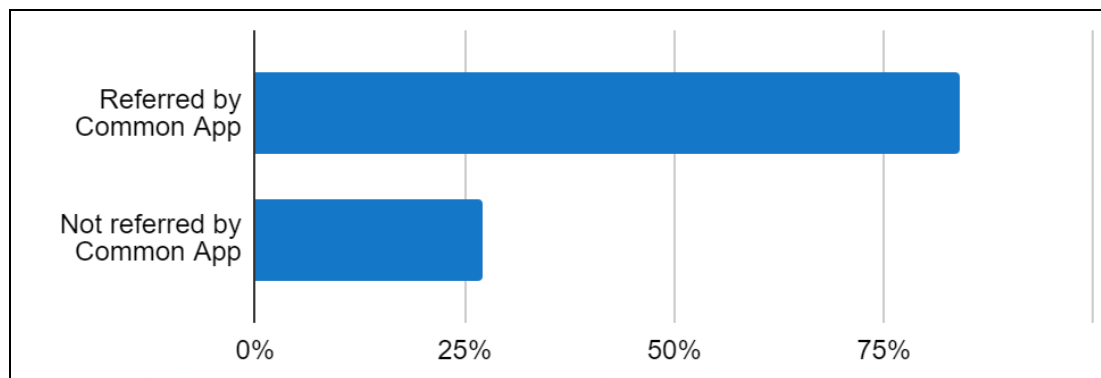
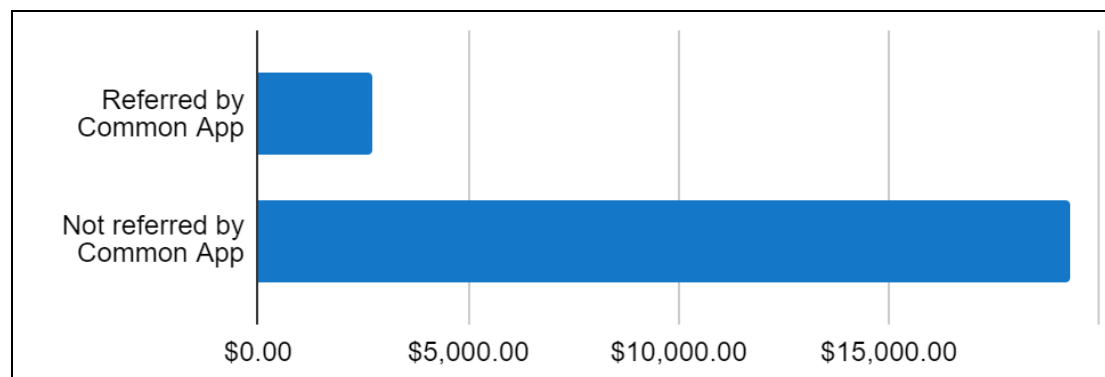


Figure 6. Average suggested parental contribution of Equitable Excellence Scholarship applicants by referral source



Conclusion and next steps

In all, we have several main learnings to emphasize thanks to this work. First, students were extremely engaged in our email outreach related to financial affordability options, indicating both that we can be a trusted source for students in this arena, and also that students are clearly interested in this sort of information.

Second, our intervention was successful in driving underrepresented students to apply who likely would not have applied otherwise. These students were also highly likely to receive the scholarship, significantly increasing the amount of scholarship dollars that these underrepresented students received and representing an important break from the status quo of private scholarship aid.

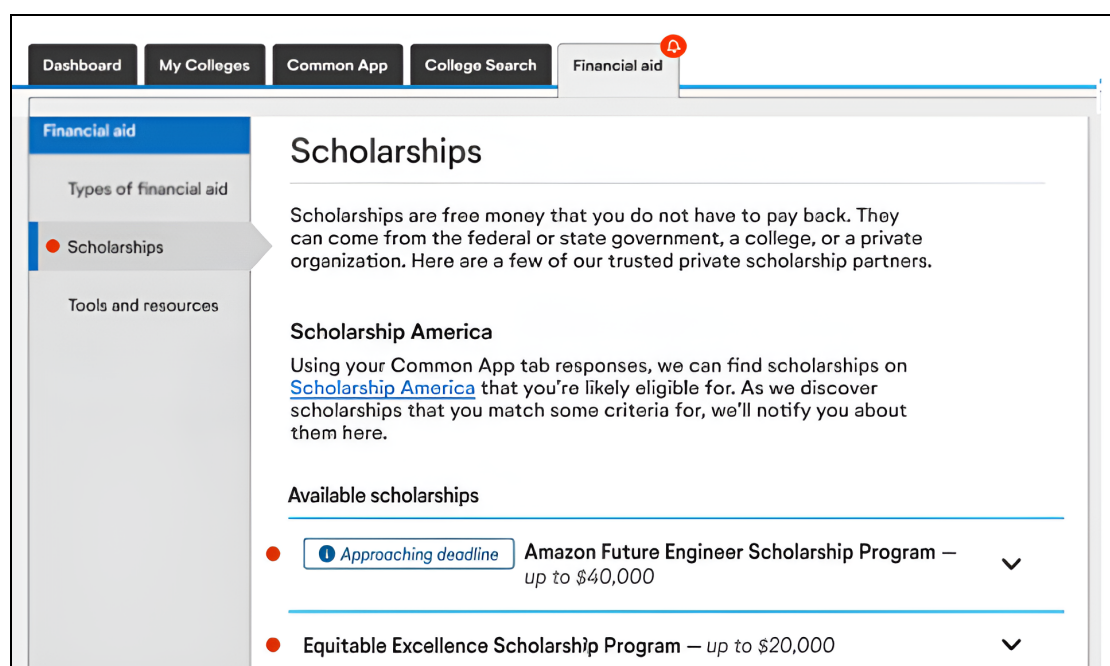
On the other side of the equation, our outreach also increased the diversity of both the applicant and recipient pool for the scholarship provider, indicating that this kind of partnership can help those providers reach underrepresented students they might not otherwise be able to.

Finally, this work shows that partnerships are essential to advancing more equitable private scholarship awarding practices. While Common App was successful in driving diverse applicant pools for participating scholarship programs, Scholarship America's work to implement revised scoring models with the Equitable Excellence Scholarship program was an equally critical ingredient in shifting funding to racially underrepresented students with high financial need.

Bringing scholarship outreach into the Common App platform

These findings have all indicated to us the growing need and value for supporting students in this arena of college affordability, and the success of our email outreach this year drove us to think about what the next chapter of this work could look like. To pursue our goals for scaling this program and deepening our impact, we integrated our targeted scholarship outreach directly into our application platform for a more streamlined and unified experience in the 2023-2024 application season. We hypothesized that by providing this information via our trusted platform, we could improve student engagement – ultimately increasing our impact on diversification of applicant pools and distribution of funds to underrepresented students.

Figure 7. Illustration of in-app scholarship notification for 2023-2024 outreach



We plan to share more complete insights in the coming season with another research brief, but we're already seeing how this shift has driven more diverse applicant pools for scholarship providers and facilitated the award of substantially more funds to underrepresented students versus email outreach alone. We see the expansion of in-app connection to scholarships as integral to reaching more Common App students than ever with scholarship opportunities in future cycles.

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