

Eight Steps to Winning a Scholarship

Financial aid administrators offer advice to students

Families often hear about the millions of scholarship dollars that go unused each year, an anecdote that has been repeated so many times that it is accepted as fact. Unfortunately, this pot of scholarships at the end of the rainbow is a myth: While some scholarships go unused, much of the money included in that figure comes from employers' tuition remission programs. There are scholarships out there, however, and you can increase your odds of winning one by following these eight steps:

1. Consult the financial aid office: The largest amount of financial aid comes from federal, state, and institutional grants and tuition discounts. Your financial aid office can help you find information on available scholarships, grants, and loans according to your needs and background.
2. Contact your academic department: If you have already decided on a major, your academic department may be aware of awards designated for students in your area of study. The student aid office does not always have information on these highly specific programs, so be sure to check both.
3. Use a free scholarship search engine: Ask the student aid office to recommend free scholarship search sites other students have found useful. Online searches let you focus on scholarships that fit your personal characteristics, helping you target your search to only those scholarships for which you are most likely to qualify. Some sites bombard users with promotional scholarships that may turn out to be advertisements in disguise, however, so make sure you know what you are signing up for when and if you give out your personal information.
4. Never assume: Don't believe that because you don't have straight A's and can't shoot a 3 pointer, there's nothing available to you. There are scholarships available based on hobbies, interests, background, financial need, etc. According to FinAid.com, there's even a \$1,000 scholarship for a left-handed student. Seek out local and national organizations and associations in your areas of interest to see whether any scholarship opportunities exist.
5. Write the essay: No one likes to write essays, so use that fact to your advantage. Scholarships that require essays receive fewer applicants, giving you a better chance of qualifying. Keep copies of all the application materials you submit; often essays and other application materials can be tweaked and used again for future applications. Be sure to thoroughly proofread before submitting each application.
6. Stack up the small scholarships: Studies show that families often overlook scholarships that are less than \$500. You may be thinking that these awards won't even make a dent in your college costs, but adding up multiple small awards can prove to be a benefit in your scholarship quest.
7. Apply early: The best time to apply is NOW! Waiting too long will result in missed deadlines. Seniors should start filling out applications to meet the early or mid-fall application deadlines. Don't wait to be accepted to a college to research and apply for private scholarships. If you don't receive a scholarship the first time around, don't get discouraged. Most scholarships are not limited to freshmen; you may have better luck the following year.
8. Don't get scammed: The Federal Trade Commission warns consumers about scholarship scams, which promise that, for a fee, they can help the family access more student aid. Similar scams charge students high scholarship search or application fees. According to the FTC, "[M]ost scholarship sponsors do not charge up-front fees to apply for funding, and no legitimate scholarship sponsor can guarantee that you will win an award." The financial aid office at your school can help you apply for student aid, and free scholarship searches are available online.

Even without scholarships, families can still find ways to afford college. Start by filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and contact your school's financial aid office to find out what federal, state, and institutional aid you might qualify for. Finding money for college is a lot like taking classes: The way to succeed is to do your homework.

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) is a nonprofit membership organization that represents more than 14,000 financial aid professionals at nearly 3,000 colleges, universities, and career schools across the country. Each year, financial aid professionals help more than 16 million students receive funding for postsecondary education. Based in Washington, D.C., NASFAA is the only national association with a primary focus on student aid legislation, regulatory analysis, and training for financial aid administrators. In addition to its member Web site at www.NASFAA.org, the Association offers a Web site with financial aid information for parents and students at www.StudentAid.org.