



## **How to Move forward in the Search of Scholarships for College**

By Nancy Shonamon, Christian School Representative

With light at the end of the tunnel regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to wrap our minds around how to get back on track. Recently, I read an article that compared the effects of the pandemic on individuals being like Humpty Dumpty having a great fall. It is challenging to know how to put the pieces back together again. This is especially challenging to older high school students who watched the class of 2020 struggle with the loss of important life events such as prom, graduation ceremonies, and in-person college classes.

Spring is an important time for students to focus on ACT/SAT test preparation, college visits, and ending their final semesters academically strong. With the pandemic causing many unexpected economic challenges, families are left with questions about how to pay for their child's future education. Let's investigate a strategy for resolving those questions.

As a private school educator, I know obtaining scholarships for students to go to college is typically at the forefront of a parent's mind. After paying thousands of dollars for a private education, the question always lingers, "How do I pay for college?" With the costs of higher education escalating rapidly and extra economic pressure being a reality in many cases, successfully navigating the waters of college scholarships this year has become even more critical. Listed below are key ideas to keep in mind as you venture into the world of preparing financially for future college plans despite some of the unknowns of COVID.

## **It Is Never Too Early to Start**

Just as you would plan your budget to accommodate buying a car or a house, planning for college expenses needs to begin early. Planning may involve opening a bank account when a child is young. It may involve setting aside money monthly into a college fund. Some parents sell a property or downsize their home. The important thing to remember is to start today. Once you begin searching, it is surprising to find scholarship opportunities for students as young as 10 years old. It is also important for families to have a financial plan to pay at least for a portion of a student's college education out of their own pockets. Receiving a scholarship is wonderful, but only a small percentage of students get that coveted "full ride." So get started early.

## **Get Well-Acquainted with Your Guidance Counselor**

Not all students can realistically expect their guidance counselor to know them by name. In school environments where graduating classes number in the hundreds, it can be a common experience to meet your guidance counselor once or twice during your high school career. Be intentional about having conversations with your guidance counselor about your plans and goals for the future. As the counselor receives information about scholarship opportunities, those conversations will come to mind, giving the counselor an opportunity to share potential scholarships that align with your personal journey.

Getting to know the counselor can be done in a variety of ways. Make a family appointment to discuss your goals. Frequently visit the guidance counselor's office to check out resources. Volunteer to assist in the guidance counseling office. In some cases, families have found that visiting a private school during key promotional days can often allow a guidance counselor to give more personalized attention to students who are seeking scholarships.

## **Build a Student Resumé**

Just like an individual builds a resumé in the adult working environment, building an impressive student resumé plays a major role in obtaining college scholarships. I often encourage students to find a way to stand out among their peers. This could involve volunteering in an area that is related to your career goals. So get involved in school organizations. Better yet, work toward obtaining a leadership position in the organization or club.

Students look more attractive on a resumé when their GPA or numeric averages stand out among their peers. Do not be afraid to take challenging courses, start a business, enter contests, or get a job. All these highlights on a student resumé can capture the attention of scholarship decision-makers.

## **Learn About Scholarships**

Every college website provides information about scholarships in relation to ACT/SAT test scores, class ranking, and GPAs. This is typically the source of the first round of scholarship awards. Investing in your daily coursework and test prep activities can produce big dividends for students. Another strong resource for scholarship information is search engines. Sites like [fastweb.com](http://fastweb.com), [scholarships.com](http://scholarships.com), and [mycollegeoptions.org](http://mycollegeoptions.org) typically allow a student to create a profile. These sites then search for potential scholarship matches and send an email to the student when a match has been found. The College Board and ACT websites host valuable information for students on the journey towards post-secondary education. The key is to personally embrace the journey by actively spending time obtaining information.

## **Stay Organized**

Once you begin to apply for scholarships, it is critical to find an organizational system that works for you. Many find it valuable to create a spreadsheet reflecting due dates, dates of applications, deadlines, contact information, award notifications, etc. With this information detailed in a single location, students can be more successful in consistently providing information in a timely manner for potential scholarships. Searching for scholarships may seem like a full-time job. Today's students are busy with academics, activities, work, and social events. Being organized can be significantly helpful in the scholarship search journey.

## **Look Professional**

Researching the organizations offering the scholarship and keeping notes on their mission will assist students in tailoring their application and essays toward a targeted purpose, thus increasing chances of being selected for scholarship awards. Using a striking voice in writing essays, producing applications and paperwork free of grammatical errors, and presenting information succinctly and professionally increase a student's chance to earn scholarship awards.

## **Think Local**

Do not forget to check out local resources in your community. Students often find churches, local businesses, community organizations, or VFW organizations that offer fabulous scholarship opportunities. It can be even more effective to find leaders in your community who are connected to your targeted career goals and approach them with requests for scholarship funds or sponsorships and internships. Some of your best resources for college scholarships are in your own neighborhood.

## **Do Not Give Up**

A final word of advice is to never give up. Navigating the waters of the scholarship search can be tiresome at times, even more challenging with various effects of the pandemic. However, with focused effort, creative thought, strong organization and planning, students can find that post-secondary education is obtainable and affordable. Thousands of dollars in available scholarship money go unclaimed each year. Was that a direct result of a student not taking the time to write a simple essay or making a phone call to a local business? That money is waiting to be awarded to someone. Why can't that someone be you?

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