Discover how to help students leverage their leadership qualities into merit scholarships that colleges offer to attract high performers.

BY CHERI STERMAN

School counselors know which students are leaders. You see their passion for community service, knack for creative writing and their drive for personal achievement. You see the intangible qualities that make certain students stand out. What you may not know is how to help them leverage those qualities into merit scholarships that colleges offer to attract high performers. College merit scholarships provide reduced or free tuition, sometimes free room and board and almost always significant leadership roles for students they view as scholars.

Among the 4,000-plus colleges in the United States, many of the private and public schools offer scholarships based on merit. They use merit scholarships to attract highly talented students regardless of the family’s financial status or willingness to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASA). Although each institution has a unique set of policies and processes for merit scholarship, you may be surprised to see how many highly ranked colleges waive or reduce tuition for students they see as strong leaders. They are looking for scholars who contribute to campus life in ways that align with the school’s mission or donors’ endowed priorities.

Although strong academic standing is a part of the selection process, students who earn merit scholarships are not...
always straight-A students nor are they necessarily high school valedictorians or class presidents. Colleges’ merit scholarship criteria reflect the vision of the school or the donors who endowed specific scholarship funds. For example, Duke University and the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill both offer Robertson Scholars free tuition, room and board based on their “demonstrated ability to make the most of opportunities that are presented to them and create possibilities where none may have previously existed.”

Additionally, UNC – Chapel Hill provides 50 students each year with full tuition as Morehead-Cain Scholars. Who are they looking for? According to the application information, “It isn’t the high-achieving student we seek so much as the scholar – the one for whom knowledge is about more than grades and test scores and for whom learning is an appetite rather than a means to an end. Leadership – it’s more than titles held or roles played. Here, leadership demonstrates courage and action. Morehead-Cains initiate. They act and impact. They influence and they inspire.” Similarly, University of Virginia’s Jefferson Scholars are selected based on “leadership, scholarship and citizenship.”

Liberal Arts Colleges
Many colleges offer merit scholarships to attract students who might otherwise attend a higher-ranked school. Most liberal arts colleges ranked 50–200 by various college ranking/review services offer significant scholarships to attract students. However, don’t assume prestigious colleges don’t offer merit scholarships. For example, several liberal arts colleges ranked in the top 50 by the U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges List 2012 offer merit scholarships. This includes:
- Davidson College in North Carolina (#11)
- Washington and Lee University in Virginia (#12)
- Smith College in Massachusetts (#19)
- Bucknell University in Pennsylvania (#20)
- University of Richmond in Virginia (#27)
- Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts (#29)
- Lafayette College in Pennsylvania (#40)
- Union College in New York (#40)
- Skidmore College in New York (#49)

Some are targeted to specific skills, such as Bucknell’s creative writing scholarship and Skidmore’s music scholarship. Other liberal arts colleges such as Washington and Lee University and
University of Richmond provide free tuition, room and board to dozens of students with a variety of talents.

Many of the national universities that are highly ranked by U.S. News & World Report also offer significant merit scholarships. This includes:

- University of Chicago in Illinois (#5)
- Duke University in North Carolina (#10)
- Washington University in Missouri (#14)
- Vanderbilt University in Tennessee (#17)
- Emory University in Georgia (#20)
- University of Southern California (#23)
- University of Virginia (#25)
- Wake Forest University in North Carolina (#29)
- University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill (#29)
- Brandeis University in Massachusetts (#31)
- University of Rochester in New York (#35)
- Georgia Institute of Technology (#36)
- Lehigh University in Pennsylvania (#38)
- University of Miami in Florida (#38)
- Pennsylvania State University (#45)
- George Washington University in Washington, D.C. (#50)
- Tulane in Louisiana (#50)

Looking for Leaders

Each scholarship has unique criteria. Yet, leadership is the most consistent theme. Recognition by the high school is expected. Several of the scholar selection committees require that the application process begin with the high school counselor recommendation, including Davidson College’s Belk Scholarship, University of Virginia’s Jefferson Scholars and Emory University’s Scholars. Some scholarships require additional essays focused on a particular theme or priority articulated by a donor. For example, University of Washington in St. Louis, Mo., offers a range of full tuition scholarships, each with a specific theme including the Mylonas for humanities, Moog for biology and chemistry, Lien for social sciences, and Ervin and Rodriguez for community leadership.

The numbers may surprise you and your students. Not only is the quality and quantity of schools offering full merit scholarships news to many but the number of scholarships each school provides is often surprising. For example, nearly 10 percent of the Washington and Lee University incoming freshman class (44 out of 450) receive full-tuition Johnson scholarships. The list of colleges offering significant scholarships expands as you look at schools ranked slightly lower than the top 50, including: Boston University, Muhlenberg College, Dickinson College, Ursinus College, William and Mary College, American University, Drexel University, Clemson University, Elon University, Goucher College and many state schools including the University of Pittsburgh and Ohio State University.

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This information changes each year, and the best way to stay current is to check the colleges’ websites, searching for merit scholarships.

Even if schools offer partial rather than full scholarships, having a student enroll as a university scholar provides an opportunity to stand out to faculty, be nominated for leadership roles and enter the college with an advantage. Scholar perks could include early course registration, serving on the university president’s advisory council, attending special receptions and opportunities to introduce celebrity speakers, all special experiences that put students on a high profile path within their colleges.

**What You Can Do**

As a school counselor, you can help strong candidates prepare for the scholarship selection process. Much of the preparation begins early in students’ middle and high school years. Make sure your high-potential students do more than the typical profile of strong academics and school activities. Help them identify community organizations where they can volunteer. Coach them on how to start new organizations, particularly community service organizations, and document the results of their efforts. They should submit their outstanding number of community service hours to the President’s Council on Service and Civic Participation, an online tracking program that grants the President’s Volunteer Service Awards at various levels of hours.

Colleges tend to select students that have received national or regional awards. Help students apply for external recognition. For example, the Prudential Spirit of Community Award is granted to 100 middle and high school students each year for outstanding community service. Urge strong writers and artists to apply for the Scholastic Alliance for Young Artists and Writers awards, prestigious national recognition of creative talent. Help budding business-minded students become entrepreneurs who apply for the National Federation of Independent Businesses Young Entrepreneur Awards.

Success and recognition leads to further success and recognition. When your school recognizes student leadership at the district level it builds momentum that helps students gain recognition from national organizations. For example, the National Coca Cola Scholars, Kohl’s Cares Scholarship, Soroptimist Scholarship and AXA Achievement Scholarships all review the honors and awards students received from their schools and local communities. Each of those scholarships provides financial stipends from $1,000–$20,000. Receiving them attracts the college scholarship selection committees’ attention, all of which builds the profile of a potential scholar.

**Prepping for the Selection Committee**

Coach your students on how to craft a resume that will catch the eye of college admissions officers. Help them build a portfolio documenting awards and newspaper clips of their accomplishments to take to college interviews. Help them build a website that provides links to videos they produced and TV coverage they received. Review their scholarship essays (additional essays are often required for scholarships). And most importantly, help your scholarship candidates prepare for the scholarship selection weekends.

Many of the colleges offering full merit scholarships fly candidates to campus to “compete.” Coach your students on the importance of collaboration vs. competition. Help them understand how to graciously stand out as a leader while exhibiting humility and positive interaction skills. Conduct mock interviews with them so they learn how to answer challenging questions about their leadership roles and why they want to attend this college.
Although it is an honor for any student to be invited to a finalist weekend, they need to understand that every finalist is high-caliber on paper, and the final decisions on scholarship awards are usually based on interpersonal skills the selection committee observes over the course of the full weekend, not just in the interview.

Each student has a unique family financial situation, and you may or may not be privy to a particular student’s situation. Although most college financial aid and many scholarships are based on need, merit scholarships often are independent of need and can provide students not only with free tuition, room and board but also with engaging leadership roles that can lead to post-college success.

You can help exceptional students win these scholarships by becoming aware of what is available, learning the criteria for specific scholarships and helping students position themselves as exceptional leaders. It’s a lot of work for the students and anyone who coaches them, but thousands of students each year earn what amounts to a $250,000 award – well worth the effort.

Cheri Sterman is an educator who has helped many students identify and leverage their strengths into awards and scholarships. Her two daughters were awarded full-tuition merit scholarships. The eldest is a Richmond Scholar at the University of Richmond and the younger is the 2015 Graylin Scholar at Wake Forest University.

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