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The Applicant-Focused Scholarship Program

A comprehensive guide to auditing, updating, and improving your program to better serve your applicants.

Scholarship programs are designed fundamentally to do good. Yet a program's application can actually cause frustration, confusion, and abandonment.

To best achieve your goal, you need an application that encourages students to meet theirs. That means no paper applications, fillable PDFs, or even outdated webforms. It's time to take advantage of the technology available and make applying to your program achievable.

In this ebook, we'll take about three steps you can take to improve your program and, in turn, develop a pool of qualified and engaged applicants:

- Improving the Promotion of Your Scholarship Program

- Eliminating Barriers to Entry for Applicants

- Making Your Application User Friendly

Making these sometimes small, always smart changes to your application and process can result in a big change in how your program is seen by applicants.

Improving the Promotion of Your Scholarship Program

Your mission is to help students achieve success, but first you need to help them find the opportunity.

Most of us enjoy when things are easy. We click a few buttons and our groceries are delivered to us from Amazon. We pre-order our Starbucks while heading out the door or hopping off the train, and walk in to a tall, steaming cup displaying our name in black ink.

Your scholarship applicants want things to be easy, too. When you first launch a scholarship program you might assume that you'll have tons of people applying — hey, free money! — but it's not always the case. The market is saturated with scholarships and applicants, just like your average consumer, will go the simplest route, gravitating to the programs they already know about and completing applications that are the easiest to manage.

So how do you better promote your scholarships and ensure submissions from the most qualified applicants possible ... without increasing your staff headcount or operating budget? And are you ready to handle the influx of applicants after you've stepped up your promotional game?

1.

Innovate your marketing strategy with social media ads

Consider using new media to better promote your scholarships. With **71% of teens using two or more social media platforms daily**, your audience is captive and waiting. Facebook has a massive and diverse audience — 1.18 billion daily active users, in fact. Unlike traditional print ads, you can target Facebook ads to the type of applicants you're looking for based on location, demographics (age, education levels) and interests.

Facebook has a massive and diverse audience:

1.18 billion

DAILY ACTIVE USERS

With Facebook ads, you can set your budget and schedule based on what works for you. If you want your ad to run continuously, you can spend a certain amount each day. Or, if you're looking to run your ad for a specified length of time — say an application deadline is approaching — setup your ad with a lifetime budget. Facebook will evenly spread the amount you select over a designated period of time with a lifetime budget.

The best part of Facebook ads is that you can keep an eye on their performance right from the "Ad Manager" dashboard and make adjustments as needed. View an estimate of how much you're spending each day. Pay particular attention to the "Frequency" metric for your ad — or, how often someone saw your ad. An ideal frequency for a scholarship application might have multiple views before someone takes action and begins an application. If any of your ads have a very high frequency and low performance, it may be time to rethink your ad strategy. This means, lots of folks are seeing your ads, but not taking action. To learn more of the basics of getting started with Facebook marketing, or setting up a Facebook page for your organization if you don't have one, **review these tips**.

Consider tapping into Instagram ads, too. **With more than 800 million active users on the platform — and 59 percent of those in the U.S. under age 30 — your prime target audience for scholarships is on Instagram.** If you've already setup Facebook ads, you have a good understanding for how Instagram ads work, too. With Facebook acquiring Instagram in 2012, Instagram ads are managed through the Facebook platform. One of the biggest differences on Instagram are the format options for your ad: single photo, video or slideshow. If you're goal is to drive your audience to your website to complete a scholarship application, consider a single photo ad with a strong call to action. To get started, find **step-by-step instructions** for getting started with Instagram ads.

2.

Leverage industry groups and websites

Start by leaning on the experience of your fellow providers via the National Scholarship Providers Association. NSPA's mission is to increase the awareness of scholarships and their impact on higher education. One way NSPA does this is by celebrating National Scholarship Month each November. There's also opportunities to get involved with NSPA throughout the year with their interactive **Member Q&A Forum** where members can ask questions directly to other colleagues for best-practice sharing. Or, reference their member-only, online resources that can help your scholarship program like the **Resource Library** and the **Scholarship Program Toolkit**, a comprehensive resource guide on starting and managing scholarship programs.

There is a fee to join NSPA, so you'll want to check out their offerings and member benefits **here**.

Getting your program on NSPA is a great start, but the more places your program is listed, the better. Include details about your offering on popular scholarship search sites like **GoodCall**, **FastWeb**, **Scholarships.com**, and **Niche**.

Eliminating Barriers to Entry for Applicants

You have their attention and interest. But only for so long.

Eighty three percent of academic scholarships are selected based on a panel of judges who score the online application, according to a 2016-2017 membership survey by the **National Scholarship Providers Association** (NSPA). With so much importance placed on the online application, make it easy for candidates to complete — and for you to judge — by considering these four common stumbling blocks.

1.

Confusion on eligibility

Time is valuable for both you and your applicants, and neither of you want to waste it because of avoidable confusion. Include a simple eligibility quiz at the start of your application to help candidates determine if they meet the required criteria for the scholarship and simultaneously help you weed out undesirable applicants. For example, do they have a bachelor's degree and a selected major, which might be a requirement for your scholarship? Do they reside in a certain state or have a GPA of 3.5 or above? If they check the boxes for whatever your eligibility criteria might be, they can proceed and complete the application … or move on to one for which they are better suited.

👍 **PROTIP:**

Qualifying quizzes work best with quantitative questions like GPA or county of residence, which are easy for students to complete and for scholarship managers to review. In fact, academic merit, financial need and community service were the most popular eligibility criteria used when choosing scholarship recipients in the 2016-2017 NSPA survey. If you want to include qualitative eligibility questions that are open-ended or in essay form, you'd be better suited to setting up a multi-stage application with a review after the first stage.

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2.

Complicated instructions

It seems obvious, but this one bears repeating when it comes to avoiding any stumbling blocks for students with your online applications. Overly complicated applications are a deal-breaker. Simplify your applications by breaking them into parts. (Remember to include stop and save functionality, too, so applicants can complete a section and come back to it later.) Consider breaking up your application like so:

Part 1: Eligibility check. Does the candidate have the required background or experience?

Part 2: Profile. Collect the applicant's contact information and other basic details

Part 3: Application Include program-specific questions about the applicant's activities, grades, awards, interests, and other scholarships.

Part 4: Outside information. Clearly outline how many letters of recommendation are required, what transcripts are needed, etc. Include easy uploading and the ability to directly request letters from the system here, too

Part 5: Follow up information. Clearly outline the next steps — how long will a review take? How will the applicant hear from you? Are there any further tasks they may need to participate in, like an interview?

Part 6: Breathe a sigh of relief. Your new and approved application is a lot less complicated, and more qualified submissions should be right behind.

3.

Lack of engagement on your part

Checking in or emailing applicants when you receive completed applications is a no-brainer and, honestly, expected. Consider incorporating notifications to would-be applicants at additional stages of the application to keep them interested and engaged. After all, proactive feedback is key to pre-empting questions from your applicants regarding the status of their applications and avoiding an inbox full of questions. After the eligibility check, send a note reminding applicants their eligibility is confirmed, and they can proceed to the next step. This process works great before an in-person interview, too, by keeping applicants informed and engaged along the way — and meeting important deadlines. Notifications can be automated, leaving you with less administrative work.

👍 PROTIP:

Over communicate when it comes to the eligibility quiz by ensuring applicants know when they are not eligible — not just when they are eligible. If you are using standard metrics, your application portal should be able to display this to an applicant as soon as they hit "submit" on the quiz. This removes the time it takes for staff to notify in-eligible candidates of their status, and focus on more suitable candidates.

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4.

Required essays

We've seen **video essays start to replace written essays for college applications**, especially for art and design schools. But, there's room for it scholarship applications, too. Consider replacing the online essay portion of your application with video to aid in faster and higher-volume applications. In the age of Snapchat and Instagram Stories, video might seem more approachable to applicants than a 500-word essay. Better yet, students applying for scholarships based on need rather than academic achievement can avoid the high cost of hiring a tutor to prepare for an essay.

WRITTEN ESSAYS

VIDEO ESSAYS

Making Your Application User Friendly

An accessible application is one that gets to the applicant all the way to the "Submit" button.

When you run a **scholarship management process**, you have one goal. OK, you have like 483 goals, but if you boil it down, you have one MAIN goal: to ensure the most worthy applicants are awarded and provided a chance to further their education and ultimately make a difference. That's why you manage your application process with care. Why you require transcripts and letters of recommendation and essays. Why you ensure your board and reviewers and supporters have a chance to lend their input.

But all those steps do more than help uncover the best applicants — they create a lot of work. Work for you and your team of reviewers, many of whom may be volunteers. Everyone's workload would be simpler if, to start, they were instantly able to eliminate all unqualified applications, focusing only on those that held real promise and potential.

By working in one or more of these three features into your scholarship application, you can reduce the clutter and move strong candidates to the top of the pile automatically, saving the time of everyone involved.

User Profiles

Submission portals are accessed using a name and password, just like any user-based system you have used online. With a scholarship management platform submission portal, applicants simply hit apply, create a login, and get started. A personal profile quickly collects the identifying information you need and becomes the base information for any application they may submit to that day or in the future.

But the time savings can get even better. Use a system to manage your school's students, your association's members, or your foundation's followers? Integrate that system with your application management system via single sign on, and the data flows between them. They begin their application with the email address you have on file, and their profile is automatically populated with the info you already have, meaning fewer fields to fill out.

Want to go even a step further? Consider accepting data from a universal profile system like Scholar Snapp. With these programs a student can fill out all their information — from personal profile to school experience to volunteer work and so forth — in the universal system and import it into each accepting application with the click of a button.

Pre-scoring Rounds

Depending on the focus of your scholarship, it's inevitable that some some candidates will be a better match for the award than others. In order to reduce the amount of work for some reviewers, many organizations do an initial round of review on submitted applications, only forwarding those who passed this first cut to their review team. But this process can be automated with pre-scoring. In pre-scoring, your first stage application is typical radio button, check box, or drop-down questions, but behind-the-scenes the database has assigned weighted scores to the various answers. For example, a question could ask "How many community service hours have you completed during the 2017-18 school year?", with "None" receiving a score of 0, "1-5" a score of 5, "10-20" a score of 10, and "20+" a score of 20. As an applicant completes and submits these various questions, a score is automatically tabulated. You can then review the scores and decide to send only a top percentage or those above a certain score on to the review team, knowing that the time your team now puts in is evaluating verified, qualified applicants.

Automatic Letter of Recommendation Requests

Once you know you have a qualified candidate on your hands, you need them to fill out the next round of the application and submit all of their supporting documentation. This often includes Letters of Recommendation from past teachers or coaches. Requiring a student to gather these on their own and then submit can become a logistical nightmare of matching names and emails, following up on missing information, and connecting paper copies with digital applications. A built-in request module allows the student to enter the emails of the individuals they would like to request letters from, add in a personal note, and then send off the requests — right from within the application. The recipients will receive an email with the note and custom URL where they can upload their letter. That uploaded file is automatically attached to the application in the database, easily visible now to both administrators and the reviewers.

Make the move and improve.

Discover how one new platform could make so many positive changes to your scholarship program. Learn more at **wizehive.com**.