

Exploding Five College Scholarship Myths

By Benjamin Kaplan

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Hold your ears and take cover. Because in this article, we are going to explode five widespread myths about winning college scholarships – myths that have, unfortunately, prevented many deserving students from winning money for college. By learning the truth behind these myths, you’ll gain a better understanding of the essential “rules” of the college scholarships game – an understanding that helped me win nearly \$90,000 in merit scholarships. So let’s begin...

Myth #1: “Only students with high academic achievement win merit scholarship.”

The Real Story: Scholarships are awarded to students with all sorts of talents and interests. In fact, many of the best scholarship programs are designed for students who devote their time to such diverse fields as music and the arts, foreign languages, community service, science, leadership, writing and oratory, to name a few. Typically, these programs are entirely “grade blind” – meaning that grades are not used as a judging criteria.

Furthermore, many scholarships that do take into account grade point averages (GPAs) only use such quantitative measures as preliminary cutoff points. For instance, soc scholarship contests specify that applicants have a minimum 2.5GPA. Once you’ve cleared this minimum bar, grades don’t impact your chances of winning.

Finally, even when GPA is used as an evaluation factor, it’s only one aspect of a student’s application. One of the largest scholarship contests, the Coca-Cola Scholars Program, is known for selecting students that do not necessarily have top grades. Other programs use a broader definition of academics that includes areas of interest and study outside of the traditional school curriculum. The bottom line is that most scholarship programs aren’t myopic: They take into account that applicants have much more to offer than simply the grades that appear on their transcripts.

Myth #2: “Star athletes are the big scholarship winners.”

The Real Story: Just as the letter grades on your transcript aren’t a prerequisite for winning scholarships, varsity letters earned on the playing field aren’t a requirement either. This myth stems from the confusing between the athletic scholarship awarded by college and merit-based scholarship contests. Although a few merit-based contests are targeted at athletes who excel on and off the field, for the vast majority of contests, athletic prowess is just another element of a student’s record – equivalent to having a skill in any other field.



Myth #3: “Scholarship applicants should seek to compile the longest list of extracurricular activities.”

The Real Story: As is the case in many other aspects of life, winning scholarships is about quality, not quantity. Some people think that to win these awards you must have devoted your entire high school career to participating in extracurricular activities. On the contrary, most scholarship winners distinguish themselves by the devotion they have demonstrated to a particular activities or activities, rather than by the sheer quantity of their involvement.

Winning scholarships isn't about having the longest list of extracurriculars. Instead, it's about communicating who you are and what you care about through the activities you participate in and enjoy. And even if you can't rattle off one particular activity that you've been especially passionate about, don't worry: It's really not too difficult to find extracurricular activities in which you are well-suited.

Myth #4: “The track record you've already accumulated determines whether you'll win scholarships.”

The Real Story: What you do after you decide to apply for scholarships is just as important as the record you have already accumulated. This holds true regardless of how much time you have until a particular scholarship application is due. Content strategies, for instance, increase your chances of winning by adding depth and breadth to your existing record. Likewise, packaging strategies help make your application stand out from the crowd by creating a cohesive message that highlights talents, communicates passions, and emphasizes potential. So don't fall into the trap of thinking that your die has already been cast. What you do not will make all the difference in the world.

Myth #5: “Students should focus their time & energy on only one or two scholarships.”

The Real Story: Some students make the mistake of thinking that they maximize their chances of winning by pouring all of their energy into one or two scholarships. Such a strategy, however, is exactly what you don't want to do.

Applying for scholarships is a numbers game. A variety of factors outside of your control can affect the outcome of any given contest. Only by applying for large numbers of scholarships can you minimize such facts. As the saying goes, “don't put all your eggs in one basket.”





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