

Scholarship Myths

Straight talk from financial aid directors cuts the confusion

by Charlotte Thomas, Career & Education Editor, Peterson's

Ever hear the myth about alligators lurking in Manhattan's sewers? Bet you could name some others if you haven't come across that one. Alligators aside, myths exist everywhere, and when it comes to college scholarships, mythmakers churn them out.

However, there are valid reasons why scholarship myths can take hold. Academic institutions offer vastly different scholarship programs and have a wide variety of requirements to get them. Finding and getting scholarships is time consuming and, when you're talking about the high cost of college tuition on top of it, the process gets very complicated.

Fortunately, many people who deal with financing undergraduate education go out of their way to address these myths. Lee Sirois, Director of Financial Aid at American International College in Springfield, Massachusetts, is one of them. He visits more than twenty high schools each year, talking to college-bound students and their parents, answering questions, and dispelling their confusion about financial aid and scholarships.

Someone else who takes on scholarship myths is Marvin Carmichael. As past Chairman of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), he's familiar with the misunderstandings people have about scholarships and financial aid. He's since brought his expertise into his role as Director of Financial Aid at Clemson University.

Myth 1

Billions of scholarship dollars go unclaimed.

The mother of all scholarship myths, this one has been around since the word scholarship was invented. "I can't get a handle on where it comes from," says Carmichael. "It certainly is not from college financial aid offices." As for Clemson, Carmichael says they seldom have unawarded scholarships, and if so, it's usually because of timing or it's a highly restricted scholarship.

While the figure of billions of unclaimed dollars might be in the ball park, what the scholarship mythmakers fail to add is that all employer-paid education benefits are included in that total. Ron Laszewski, Director of Financial Aid at Bucknell University, points out that of all those supposedly unclaimed scholarships, employee tuition benefits account for about 85 percent of them. In reality, the number of unused scholarships is minuscule.

Laszewski doesn't know where this myth comes from either. He speculates that the media has a lot to do with perpetuating it. Illustrating how this particular one might endure, he refers to a scholarship that Bucknell offers for students from a specific high school who don't smoke or drink and have good grades. "It's known as the teetotaler's scholarship," says Laszewski. "And around the fall, we get calls

about it from the media even though it's an obscure scholarship for a certain number of students from a particular high school only in our state."

Myth 2

I can't possibly get a scholarship because of the stiff competition.

Tell this myth to Alan Deutschman, and he'll point you to his book, *Winning Money for College* (published by Peterson's). But aside from reading his book, ask him how he got through Princeton on practically nothing. He'll tell you that he took the initiative to enter college scholarship contests wherever and whenever he could find them. According to Deutschman, there are a lot of contests around; it just takes some resourcefulness to seek them out.

But first, you have to determine what you do well. "Many scholarship contests aren't just for valedictorians but are for people with particular interests and directions," says Deutschman, rattling off a list of possibilities such as foreign languages, science, the arts, leadership, and public speaking. As he found, the opportunities are diverse and these contests offer scholarship money at many levels. They may not pay for your entire education as they almost did for his, but they can take care of a good chunk of it.

Laszewski adds that more scholarship sources can turn up if students look for opportunities in their communities--churches, synagogues, Daughters of the American Revolution, to mention a few. A parent's employer might even sponsor scholarships for their employees' children. "Many don't require more than writing an essay or giving a speech," he says. "Your search may come up with nothing, but you've at least covered the bases."

Myth 3

Scholarships require a glamorous talent.

Being a high school football or basketball legend certainly helps, but how many students fit into that category? Headlines tout the more sensational scholarship awards without telling the full story of the less spectacular ones. Perseverance, researching what scholarships are available, filling out endless forms, and getting these forms to the right place at the right time earn scholarships, too. "People think they have to invent the cure for cancer," observes Laszewski. Determination might not be the most glamorous talent in the world, but it works when getting scholarships.

Myth 4

Scholarship searches are worth paying for.

This myth eventually will die as people discover the resources available on the Internet or in print. (See Peterson's *Scholarship Almanac 1999* or Peterson's *Scholarships, Grants & Prizes for starters*). "The public now has access to all kinds of information," says Laszewski. Parents and students have the attitude that it's little ole me against all those big colleges, when in reality, an abundance of data is at their fingertips. They just have to look for it in libraries, on the Internet and in book stores.

Myth 5

Scholarships go only to the best students.

"It's not always the top students who are recognized by scholarships," says Carmichael. Speaking of Clemson as a state-supported land-grant institution, he points out that they are not able to use tuition and fee revenue for scholarships; rather they must use the funds that come from individuals. "You will see more dependency on private gifts and government-sponsored programs at state-supported institutions," he says.

Some scholarships are awarded to students of a particular major. Carmichael illustrates this by referring to someone who, for instance, is in the textile industry and wants to set up a scholarship for Clemson's textile students. Some of those students applying for that particular scholarship might not necessarily be the highest academic achievers, but they meet the criteria established by the donor.

Myth 6

I'm a top student, so I don't have to seek scholarships. They'll come to me.

Few students get free rides with scholarships, warns Carmichael. "In most cases, students will have to depend on a variety of financial mechanisms to cover costs," he says. Students are encouraged to explore all the options available -- tuition tax credits, state and federal programs, loans, grants. Obviously, the more you have to offer in grades and talents, the more you'll probably be awarded, but that doesn't mean all you have to do is sit back and wait for the money to roll in.

Myth 7

If I apply for a loan, it will lessen my chances for a scholarship.

Parents often mistakenly think that if they get student loans, colleges will reduce any scholarship money that might have been awarded. "Not so," says Carmichael. "In all cases, if a reduction is required, loans are the first component affected."

Myth 8

Negotiation and playing hardball with colleges means I'll get more money.

"We do not negotiate scholarships. We have rigid criteria and prescribed amounts of money that can be awarded," Carmichael emphatically states. He's dealt with some parents who argue, "Why is so and so giving me this much and you're not" or "Why can't you match what this college is giving me?" To which he replies, "We make objective decisions using a university committee, which includes a student."

But having said that, he adds that for need-related financial aid there is some room for adjustments if the financial situation of parents change or there are extenuating circumstances. In such cases, families should bring it to the attention of the financial aid officer in writing and be prepared to document the changes.