

The Secret to Getting Free Money for College

By [Kimberly Rotter](#)

Share this article

Like 4

Share 2

YouTube 921

g+1 2

Pin it



iStock

A sobering White House [report](#) issued this month illustrates some of the challenges faced by lower-income students who want to go to college. One fact it points out is that too many students don't even try for the best schools:

“Too few low-income students apply to and attend colleges and universities that are the best fit for them, resulting in a high level of academic undermatch – that is, many low-income students choose a college that does not match their academic ability.”

The biggest barrier to college is not the price tag

The messages we hear about college are that it is more expensive every year, we should save early and diligently to buy an education for our children, that the chance of winning a full scholarship is as slim as the chance of becoming an Olympic athlete... and so on. But it is somewhat of a myth that price is the biggest barrier to a college education. In fact, the larger barrier is lack of knowledge of how financial aid works.

Money for college is out there. Jason Lum, J.D., M.P.P, proved that by winning \$250,000 in scholarships and grants before graduating debt free. He founded [ScholarEdge College Consulting](#), where he serves as an educational consultant, advising countless students on college and scholarship planning. He is also a faculty member in [Walden University's](#) School of Public Policy and Administration and a national advocate

for greater awareness of ways to apply for and win scholarships and grants to fund a college education.

Lum points out that although it may sound counter-intuitive, for the vast majority of students the number one source of money is the school itself. Unfortunately, and as the White House report notes, most students *never even apply* for the priciest schools or for the hundreds of thousands of private scholarships that are out there. In the end, a small percentage of determined hopefuls wins the lion's share of the funds. The first secret to getting free money for college, then, is to ask for it.

How to choose a college

Mr. Lum explains that the price tag is the last thing a prospective student should be concerned with. Instead, choose a school that best fits what you're looking for. Don't focus on public and state universities solely because the advertised tuition price is lower. Private schools have large reservoirs of financial aid to dole out each year and the vast majority of students receive some type of aid. For many students, the out-of-pocket cost to attend an elite private school is *lower* than that of a public university simply because of the financial aid package awarded.

How to get money for college

Don't neglect to fill out the **FAFSA** each year as early as possible. You can correct it later on if you need to, but get it in as soon after January 1 as you can. That's because many grants are first-come first-served and funds could be depleted by the time your name comes up on the list if you are late to the table.

Don't skip the FAFSA because you think you or your parents earn too much to qualify. The worst case scenario is that your financial aid package has nothing in it – a rare occurrence. At the very least, even students with ample family resources will get access to work study programs and federally subsidized student loans – neither of which is possible without the FAFSA.

Mr. Lum's tips for approaching the scholarship process are very straightforward.

- Make a list of what's important to you as well as your current and past employment, professional affiliations, volunteerism and interests. Identify commonalities within this list to determine what organizations to research for scholarship opportunities.
- Apply for scholarships year-round. Every month of the year is a good time because scholarship deadlines occur all year long.
- Demonstrate how you align with the organization's mission and goals when applying for scholarships and grants. Often, organizations aren't looking for someone with an excellent academic record but instead are trying to find the person who best embodies their mission and goals.
- The idea that scholarships and grants are only for high school students entering college is a misconception. Many scholarships and grants are available for working adults and graduate students. For adult learners, it's important that the scholarship application essays demonstrate their life and professional experience because those experiences may actually give them an advantage over a younger, first-time college student.

Get organized

Lum encourages – strongly – hopeful recipients to be organized. It is the key, more so than a valedictorian transcript, to winning the game. Indeed, colleges don't expect 11th or 12th graders to have their education planned out. It's ok to say you don't know yet what your major will be. You also don't have to be the smartest or have the highest GPA. You do, however, need to be organized.

Apply often. The more applications you submit, the better you'll get at applying. "You'll write a lot," Lum concedes. You'll get familiar with essay questions, and might even write a few scholarship application essays that can do double duty on college applications. (A side note regarding application fees: if you can't afford the application fee for every scholarship and school you want to apply to, contact them to find out if they can waive the fee.)

Register online. Sign up on a reputable, free scholarship website like [FastWeb](#) or [SallieMae](#). Do the work to set up your profile completely and register for automatic notifications of good matches. Let the website do the work for you.

Check your email. Get in the habit of checking for messages regularly. Email is part of adult American life, and if you miss important information you could take yourself out of the running.

Keep notes. Make a list or a spreadsheet that includes contact information, pertinent deadlines and necessary tasks to complete. Use a planner or a wall calendar, and give yourself deadlines that are at least two weeks ahead of the organization's deadline.

Get feedback. When you don't win a scholarship you applied to, contact the administrator and ask – nicely – what you could have done differently to win. Don't complain, of course, or try to argue your case. Just ask for feedback and then make the changes on your next round of applications. Don't take a stand and insist why your way makes more sense. Do things their way if you want to win the game.

Meet all deadlines. Don't be late with any submission, even by one day. Scholarship committees are notoriously strict on this issue.

The lesson to learn is that you won't get what you don't ask for.

Kimberly Rotter is a writer and small-business owner. She is a featured contributor on [Credit Sesame](#) and writes professionally in several industries, including finance, education, the environment, and health and wellness.