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Private Scholarships: Addressing the Issue as a Student Service

by John Rosiak

Every financial aid office (FAO) receives from various sources information about private scholarships which its students receive or for which they may be eligible. This circumstance leaves the financial aid administrator with these questions: 1) How can this wealth of information best be processed by the FAO? 2) How can this important information be conveyed to students? and 3) What else can be done to help students locate private scholarship sources?

The purpose of this paper is to help the FAO create its own systematic approach to: 1) processing information received on private sources of student financial aid; 2) conveying most effectively this information to students; and 3) assisting students, through a self-help approach, to locate private funds for which they are eligible.

Processing Information Received

The first problem is one of proper flow of information through the FAO. What information about private sources of financial aid is received by the FAO? How can this information be systemized to create an efficiently run information delivery system?

First there is a need to clarify exactly what type of pertinent information comes into the office. This information must then be organized into a logical system that can easily be tapped to allow ready access to organized material.

Two types of information on private scholarships are received by the FAO. The first type is an information packet which is sent by private groups aiding students who need and/or merit scholarship money. This type of promotional information often comes to the FAO without being solicited. But the information can and should be solicited by the FAO. Many times the information packet contains student application forms.

The second type of information received is a cover letter accompanying a check sent by a private scholarship sponsor. The cover letter most often tells the FAO the name of the student recipient and how the funds are to be applied to the student's account. Although the information from the cover letter is often sparse, it is of great value to the FAO because the scholarship was actually received by one of the institution's own students. This is not just information about available money; this is information about a scholarship which has been awarded to a student at that institution. If little or nothing is known by the FAO about this source, follow-up should occur. An inquiry should be conducted to determine the qualifications for and other details about this scholarship.

After new or updated information is received, how can this be most efficiently handled? To utilize this information most effectively, it must be made as complete as possible, and then stored. Research often has to be conducted to fill in missing information, e. g. contact person, award criteria, deadlines, etc. This information

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should then be stored in either computer "files" or traditional paper files. This storage affords the FAO the opportunity to retrieve information which should be publicized in regular and systematic fashion. When a private scholarship file is complete, the following steps should be taken: 1) a file of applications for the fund should be created; 2) a copy of the information on the award should be sent to affected institutional units; and 3) the details of the award should be posted on bulletin boards by the FAO and published in the student newspaper. A directory listing all private scholarships, which have been thoroughly researched, should be made available. Again, this directory can be provided in either computer records or a manual binder. Following the completion of a file and a private scholarship fund, it is recommended that a note thanking the donor for providing information be sent.

Informing Students of Private Awards

The second challenge is getting the most useful information on private scholarships to students. Much of this effort is a continuation of the process already outlined; it is the natural and constant outflow of information received by the FAO. The first section of this article proposed the organization of specific material so that a student could access a file to find a scholarship for which he or she might qualify. This available information is quite specific. Particular funds have already been identified for students. The information is therefore more helpful to students than general listings in scholarship directories. The fact that a scholarship has been received by a student at the institution could be noted in the file on the fund, thus encouraging other students to feel that it might also be available to them.

In addition to compiling specific information the FAO should develop a reference library of the published materials on private awards. Included in the collection should be such publications as the *College Blue Book: Scholarships, Fellowships, Grants and Loans*, the American Legion's *Need a Lift?*, and *Don't Miss Out*, published by Octameron Associates, to name just a few items in the growing literature available. This reference collection of the FAO can be continually expanded, adding texts on aid for particular groups of students such as women, ethnic minorities, residents of certain geographical regions, and those aspiring to careers in particular professional fields. This reference library should be readily available to students. It is recommended, however, that the reference guides as well as compiled directories not be allowed out of the office. Making these materials available and known will help build the image of the FAO as a student service.

Another source of information on potential scholarships, albeit a disputed one, is the computerized search. Various commercial concerns offer computerized scholarship searches which are initiated after the student fills out a personal profile. The search agency tries to match a student with a scholarship for which he or she might qualify. These searches can be expensive for the student (up to \$45) but usually guarantee to identify five or so sources of student aid for which the individual is eligible. Some of the searches "locate" sources which are actually administered by the college (such as campus-based aid), recommend application for the GSL, or say "Check with college financial aid administrator." Sometimes a scholarship which the aid officer does not know about is identified. In these cases, this is the only way a student can learn of this source.

The value of many of these commercial, computerized searches has been questioned by aid administrators. Some feel that their cost is too expensive for the sources which are identified. This limitation should be pointed out to the students so that they know into what they may be getting themselves. If students do choose to pursue these searches, the FAO may want to document their success rate and make it known to students. Much needs to be done about determining the effectiveness of commercial, private scholarship searches.

Although the cost could be prohibitive, colleges and universities might consider purchasing a computer search system of their own. The service could be offered free or the FAO could charge the student users to offset the cost to the institution. Unlike private companies the institution could keep the charge to its student low (possibly \$1), seeking only to cover the expenses of the service. Students from neighboring institutions could possibly be given access to the service as well (for a slightly higher fee, such as \$5). Consortia of colleges could investigate buying a service to be shared by all of its students. The idea of surveying the interest which local secondary schools have in sharing such a resource (as well as the expense) might be investigated. Presently search systems are available from private computer consulting firms for under \$10,000.

Rather than purchasing a commercial system, the FAO could consider designing its own system which would match students with scholarships according to demographic, ethnic, employment related and other criteria. Before purchasing or designing a private scholarship program (and before considering the hardware needed to run such a system), the administrator must critically weigh the effectiveness of the computerized scholarship search. It is often difficult to do adequate follow-up on the successes and failures of students trying to locate private dollars. If these searches do turn up funds for which a student is eligible and an award is received, does this happen often enough to justify the particular investment in time of the administrator and the cost of the system? Some administrators feel that this is basically a self-help service which, if it pays off for even a small number of students, is worth the initial investment. The FAO should consider the pros and cons of internal and external search systems carefully.

The Self-Help Approach

In addition to getting information about specific scholarships out to the students, the FAO can also help students become familiar with the mechanics of identifying local, private sources of student financial aid. In this approach the FAO can assist students by helping them help themselves. The FAO can sponsor workshops on how one goes about identifying, contacting, and applying for private sources of aid. During these group sessions a financial aid officer can discuss available resources and advise students about methods of searching out funds. Students who have successfully found such scholarships might be asked to describe their experiences. A self-help brochure might also be developed for distribution at these sessions. These brochures can also be sent to students during the winter months encouraging them to begin the search early enough to be considered for private scholarships, many of which have deadlines early in the spring.

Workshops and brochures should cover these basic elements: 1) the need to search for outside funds; 2) how to proceed with one's search (brainstorm, think of potential sources, contact them, meet requirements and deadlines); and 3) the need to be persistent.

Conclusion

Given limited governmental funds for student assistance and the ever-increasing cost of private and public higher education, locating sources of private aid is critical. Private sources will be tapped increasingly in the future. To maximize the benefits of these resources, the FAO must seek complete information wherever it can be found, including private awards to current students. In this way, the FAO can continually and accurately update its directory of scholarships which are possible sources of aid for its students. In addition to gathering this information, the FAO should consider ways of informing students through workshops and brochures about the availability of scholarships and how to go about obtaining them.