Where College Scholarship Money Actually Comes From

A one-page guide for families starting the college search. Free to copy, print, and share.

Most families start by searching for scholarship contests online. That is the smallest pool of money and the hardest to win. The largest, most predictable awards come directly from colleges and state programs — and they are usually decided by numbers your student already has.

The Four Sources of Money

1. Automatic merit from the college	Awarded on GPA and sometimes test scores. **No separate application.** Published cutoffs, renewable each year. This is where the most money is, and it is the only category you can predict in advance.
2. Competitive awards from the college	Larger awards — honors, full-tuition, named scholarships. Require an application, essays, sometimes an interview. **The deadline is often earlier than the admission deadline.**
3. State grants and programs	State-funded grants, tuition waivers, and promise programs. Usually require the FAFSA. Many states have their own deadline that is earlier than the federal one, and some award funds first-come, first-served until the money runs out.
4. Outside and local scholarships	National contests have thousands of applicants per award. **Local awards — from your town, employer, church, or civic groups — have far better odds** and are usually announced through the counseling office.

Five Questions to Ask About Every College on the List

- Does this school offer **automatic** merit aid, and what are the exact GPA and test-score cutoffs?
- What is the **priority scholarship deadline**, and how much earlier is it than the application deadline?
- Can awards be **stacked** — can my student hold a merit award, a state grant, and an outside scholarship at the same time, or does one reduce another?
- Do we qualify for an **out-of-state tuition discount** through a regional exchange program (WUE, ACM, MSEP, or NEBHE)?
- What does the college's **Net Price Calculator** say we would actually pay — not the sticker price?

The single most expensive mistake: assuming the published sticker price is what your family will pay, and ruling out a college before running its Net Price Calculator. Every college is required to have one on its website.

Senior Year: What Happens When

General sequence. Confirm exact dates each year with your school and each college — deadlines shift.

Summer before senior year	Build the college list around money, not just fit. Run the Net Price Calculator for every school, and note which ones have automatic merit and what the cutoffs are.
Fall	Applications open and the FAFSA opens — file early, since some state and institutional aid is awarded until funds run out. Request recommendation letters. Check each college's priority scholarship deadline; several fall in November or December. Confirm whether any school also requires the CSS Profile.
Winter	State aid deadlines hit, often earlier than the federal one. Competitive scholarship interviews and finalist weekends take place.
Late winter into spring	Aid offers arrive. Compare them on **net cost after grants and scholarships**, not on total package size — loans are often listed as if they were aid.
Spring	If an offer falls short, you can **appeal**. Colleges expect it, and a written appeal with documentation often works.
May 1	Decision deadline at most colleges. Deposit, then watch for summer paperwork so aid is not forfeited over a missed form.

Three Things That Quietly Cost Families Money

- **Missing the priority deadline.** Merit money is frequently awarded on a rolling basis. An identical application submitted in January can receive far less than one from November.
- **Trading student data for a scholarship match.** Many “get matched” sites are lead generators: the list they return is often public information, and the contact details go to advertisers.
- **Comparing award letters by total dollars.** Packages mix grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans. Subtract everything you have to pay back, then compare.

Free Resources — No Account, No Cost, No Data Collection

Scholarships at 400+ colleges	collegereadyparent.org/college-scholarships
Search by GPA and test score	collegereadyparent.org/crp-scholarship-search-tool
Aid guides for all 50 states	collegereadyparent.org/state-scholarships-and-grants
Out-of-state tuition discounts	collegereadyparent.org/college-tuition-reciprocity
FAFSA timeline for parents	collegereadyparent.org/financial-aid-101
9th–12th grade checklists	collegereadyparent.org/checklists

Produced by **CollegeReadyParent.org** — an independent, parent-built resource. No paywall, no accounts, no lead forms, no student data collection. Sources are cited on every scholarship and state aid page.

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Award amounts, cutoffs, and deadlines change. Always verify directly with each college and with your state's higher education agency before applying.