

New Mexico State Aid Cheat Sheet (2027-2028)

A two-page reference for counselors and families. Free to copy, print, and share.

Counselors: this sheet covers the Class of 2027, who file 2027-2028 forms during the 2026-2027 school year. New Mexico's two largest scholarships have no application and no deadline, so nothing arrives in the mail and nothing warns a family when the money is about to stop. The front doors are the college's admission file, which needs the student coded as a resident with the correct graduation date and the final transcript received, and the college's own scholarship application, which is the only piece of this with a date on it. Rules verified against 5.7.20 and 5.7.37 NMAC, effective June 25, 2024.

The Programs at a Glance

Legislative Lottery Scholarship (recent graduates)	Tuition, at an amount set annually by sector and funded at 100 percent of sector average tuition in recent years. For residents enrolling at a New Mexico public or tribal college within 16 months of graduation or a high school equivalency credential. It does not pay the first semester. No application.
Opportunity Scholarship (everyone else, and the gap filler)	Up to 100 percent of tuition and fees after all other state aid, with course-specific fees covered to \$50 per credit hour. Any resident, any age, 6 to 18 credit hours, no income test . Last-dollar: campus merit aid, three percent scholarships, and other state aid are awarded first. No application.
New Mexico Scholars (the one nobody mentions)	Tuition, books and fees , and the only state program that works at a private nonprofit New Mexico college. Top 5 percent of the class or a 25 ACT or 1140 SAT, combined family income not over \$60,000 , full time, enrolled before the 21st birthday. Up to four annual awards. Apply at the college, not the state.
Student Incentive Grant	Need-based, awarded by the college from a fixed state allocation, for residents enrolled at least half time. The state does not publish a current maximum. When a campus runs out it runs out, so file the FAFSA early for this one.
Teacher Preparation Affordability	Up to \$6,000 a year , spendable on tuition, fees, books, supplies and living expenses, for residents at least half time in an approved teacher preparation program. Apply to the teacher prep program, not the financial aid office.
NM Native American Tuition Scholarship	Up to 100 percent of in-state tuition for residents with New Mexico tribal affiliation attending a public college in a bordering state, including Arizona, Colorado and Texas Tech. The only state program with a real state deadline: May 15 to July 1.
Also worth checking	Fire Fighters and Peace Officers Survivors: actual tuition, room and board for eligible dependents, up to six academic years, usable out of state. Wartime and Vietnam Veterans: for the veteran, not the children, certified through NM Veterans Services. Work Study: state-funded campus jobs, half time, FAFSA required, allocated early. Veterans using federal education benefits get resident tuition rates at New Mexico publics regardless of where they have lived.

Deadlines to Post on Your Wall

What	When	Why it matters
Lottery and Opportunity Scholarships	No deadline, ever	No application exists. The college determines eligibility from enrollment records.
College scholarship applications	December through February of senior year	The only deadlines in New Mexico that can be missed, and the money that covers the uncovered first semester. NMSU has published December 1. UNM has published early December for competitive awards and February 1 for automatic ones.
FAFSA opens	Fall of senior year	Not required for the Lottery or Opportunity Scholarships. Required for the Pell Grant and the Student Incentive Grant.
NM Native American Tuition Scholarship	May 15 to July 1	Opens after graduation and closes in the first week of July, when families have stopped watching for applications.
State sets the year's award amount	By June 1	NMHED notifies colleges of the maximum award. The dollar figure for a school year does not exist before then.
Petitions, consortium agreements, accommodation waivers	Third week of the semester	Colleges enforce these hard. After the window the answer is usually no.

The Rules That Trip New Mexico Families Up

Full time is an annual number. Thirty credit hours completed per academic year at a four-year or tribal institution, 24 at a community college. The per-semester floor is 12 and 9. Twelve plus twelve is 24, and 24 is not 30. Summer counts toward the annual total.

The first semester is not paid by the Lottery. The first full-time semester is the qualifying semester: complete 12 hours with a 2.5 that term and the scholarship begins in the spring. Fail it and there is no second try at the Lottery.

The FAFSA is not required for either the Lottery or the Opportunity Scholarship, and New Mexico law does not condition state aid on citizenship status. File it anyway for the Pell Grant, which is the money that reaches housing and food.

The Lottery pays a sector award, not your bill. Since 2018 the award has been calculated from sector average tuition rather than the college's own price. A school above the average can leave a gap, and the Opportunity Scholarship is what closes it.

Hours must be earned, not just registered. A withdrawal, an incomplete, or a failing grade does not count toward the annual total, even though the family paid for the seat.

The 16-month window is the edge of the Lottery track. A student who waits longer than 16 months after graduation to enroll full time leaves it entirely and becomes a returning student on the Opportunity track. Armed forces service is treated differently. A general gap year is not.

Losing it is not easily undone. Fail the qualifying semester and there is no second try at the Lottery. Lose eligibility later without an approved probationary semester and the rules require a **two-year wait** before petitioning back in. The valve that works is documented exceptional mitigating circumstances, filed with the college's lead financial aid officer, usually by the third week of the term.

The Lottery Scholarship: Check These Things Early

- 1. Which track the student is on.** A student enrolling within 16 months of graduation is a recent graduate learner and rides the Lottery track. A student 18 or older who misses that window, and who has lived in New Mexico for the previous 12 consecutive months, is a returning student learner on the Opportunity track. The calendar decides this, not the student.
- 2. Whether the qualifying semester is covered.** Have the family call the financial aid office in July and ask what is paying tuition and fees in the fall. A real answer names a specific award: a campus bridge or merit scholarship, other state aid, or the Opportunity Scholarship, in that statutory order. Preference in the first semester goes to independent students when funds are limited.
- 3. That the file is complete.** The college cannot award either scholarship until it has the final high school transcript, high school equivalency credential, or PED home school registration certificate, with the correct graduation date. Send it in June.

Credit Hours: The Number That Ends the Scholarship

Institution type	Per academic year	Floor in fall and spring	Summer
Research (UNM, NMSU, NM Tech), comprehensive (ENMU, NMHU, Northern, WNMU), tribal	30 credit hours	12 credit hours	Optional, 3 to 9 hours, counts toward the 30
Community college	24 credit hours	9 credit hours	Optional, 3 to 9 hours, counts toward the 24

Only two patterns reach 30: fifteen and fifteen, or twelve and twelve plus six in summer. Cumulative GPA must stay at 2.5. Limits do not apply to the last semester before graduation. Documented disabilities can carry a reduced requirement, with paperwork due within 30 days of the term start.

Counselor Calendar: What to Tell Students When

Junior year	Flag students near the top 5 percent of the class or a 25 ACT or 1140 SAT with family income at or under \$60,000. That is NM Scholars, which pays books and works at private colleges. Nobody applies for them if the college does not screen them.
Fall of senior year	The 2027-2028 FAFSA opens. Have every senior write down the scholarship deadline for each college on their list. That one task protects the uncovered first semester.
Early December	NMSU has published December 1 and UNM's competitive awards run early December. Every New Mexico award over \$4,000 needs a separate application due this week.
February 1	UNM's published date for automatic freshman awards, including Bridge to Success at a 2.50 GPA. Seniors with modest transcripts are still in the money here.
May and June	Native American Tuition Scholarship window opens May 15 and closes July 1. Final transcripts go to colleges. NMHED sets the year's Lottery award by June 1.
Fall of freshman year	The qualifying semester. Twelve hours minimum, fifteen preferred, 2.5 GPA. From here on, students count hours, not semesters.

Three Mistakes That Cost New Mexico Students Money

Skipping the college scholarship application because state aid is automatic. The state covers tuition. It does not cover housing, food, books or transportation, and it does not cover the first semester. The campus application is the only one with a deadline.

Registering for twelve hours and calling it full time. Twelve is full time for federal aid, housing and insurance, and it is six credits short of what New Mexico requires per year. Students find out in May, after the year is already lost.

Assuming a family earns too much. Neither the Lottery nor the Opportunity Scholarship has an income test of any kind. Middle-income families are the group most likely to talk themselves out of aid they already qualify for.

The New Mexico Trap: The Two-Year Clock

The Lottery pays a maximum of **three** fall and spring semesters at a two-year college and **seven** total across the whole undergraduate career. A community college student spends semester one qualifying, gets three paid semesters to the associate degree, and transfers with four left. Four semesters is exactly two years, with no slack. One extra term to finish the associate, which happens whenever a required course runs once a year, comes out of pocket and the clock does not give it back.

Two rules end it quietly. The award continues at the four-year school only with no break in attendance, or the semester right after the associate degree. And the receiving college cannot award anything until it has the **Scholarship Transfer Transcript**, a separate form from the academic transcript that nobody generates automatically.

Good news: dual credit completed in high school does not count against the 90-hour associate or 160-hour bachelor's credit caps.

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

Official program rules and all state programs	hed.nm.gov/financial-aid/scholarships
NMHED Financial Aid Division	1-800-279-9777 · fin.aid@hed.nm.gov
The rules themselves, in plain text	srca.nm.gov · 5.7.20 and 5.7.37 NMAC
Our full New Mexico state aid guide	collegereadyparent.org/new-mexico
Scholarships at 400+ colleges, all 50 states	collegereadyparent.org/college-scholarships

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Rules carry forward in regulation. Dollar amounts are set annually, and the 2027-2028 Lottery award is not published until June 1, 2027. Verified against the New Mexico Higher Education Department and the New Mexico Administrative Code in August 2026. Always confirm current figures with the college's financial aid office before making a financial decision.