

Getting Started - National Scholarships



A competitive award application is much more than the sum of its components: along with personal statements and letters of recommendation, successful applications require extensive planning, careful preparation, and hard work. Here are some suggested strategies and tasks to consider before you begin working on the "nuts and bolts" of your application.

Start Early

If an award is only available to seniors, you should not wait until the spring semester of your junior year to begin considering your application. Any student that has an interest in pursuing a prestigious award should begin reviewing the application requirements and plotting the necessary steps as early as possible.

Attend an Information Session/Contact the UHC National Scholarships Advisors

Applying for a national scholarship can be a difficult and nuanced task. The UHC National Scholarships advisors assist you with the application process and are happy to answer questions about which award is right for you, what the process will entail, and whether your application must be submitted through the university or directly to the sponsoring foundation. First register and attend an information session, by checking out our [calendar](#) and clicking on the click on the session you would like to attend. If you have any questions, contact us by email at sjm130@pitt.edu.

Read Websites Thoroughly

Each national award has its own unique set of expectations for and requirements from its applicants. It is imperative that you carefully review all the criteria, instructions, and guidelines. In filling out the application, pay close attention to the prompts, and provide information that answers those prompts. Award foundations will not consider applications that do not include the information they request. In addition to the foundation deadlines, make sure that you are aware of any mandatory campus-specific deadlines.

Create a Timeline

A carefully-crafted timeline will guide you through the application process and keep all relevant dates and application elements straight in your mind. This is an invaluable resource that ensures you will stay on task during the application process.

Examine Winners' Biographies

It is not uncommon to find shared traits within a group of winners for any given scholarship. Reading the biographies of recent winners can help you better determine which traits are valued by each foundation. With that information, you can identify and amplify those themes and characteristics throughout your application when telling your individual and unique story.

Establish Relationships With Faculty

A glowing assessment of your abilities from professionals within your field of study is a core component of most applications. For this reason, you should establish close relationships with faculty members as early as possible. We recommend getting to know one additional professor every semester. Stop in during their office hours, even if you don't need help with your assignments, and get to know them. A professor should be able to speak directly to your character, development as a student, and the quality of work of which you are capable. A recommendation letter with specific, concrete details about your strengths is more valuable than a generic or vague recommendation.

Selecting Recommendation Writers

Pay close attention to the specific recommendation letter requirements of awards (not only how many but from whom).

For those competitions that ask for more than two letters, it is a good idea to select people whose letters together demonstrate a diverse range of your attributes. For instance, one letter could comment on your research passion and capabilities, another could emphasize your different leadership skills, and another focus on your academics and how you demonstrate scholarship in your field.

Whether it is a professor, advisor, or employer, ask people who are familiar with you and your work. "Big names" are of little use if they can only write a generic letter about you.

Give them several months notice if possible (one month minimum). If the award is small and it is due in less than a month, ask them IMMEDIATELY after you decide you will pursue it. Waiting to ask, even if they have a letter for you on file, is inconsiderate.

If your time of application is a year or two in the future then keep in mind your relationships with faculty (or employers). When you get to know and like particular faculty, share the fact that you might apply for these awards and may ask them in the future to write you a recommendation letter. Since you want faculty to be able to write concrete things about you, they need to be paying attention to you and your work.

Obtaining the Letter

Ask your prospective referee up front if they could write you a good letter. If they say no, or respond in a way that makes you feel uncertain about the strength of their support letter, gracefully accept that (and be grateful for their honesty) and ask somebody else.

Prepare a packet of concise info about the award and why you are a "perfect" candidate. This should include the following:

- An updated resume;
- An unofficial transcript;
- A concise description of the award; and
- An explanation of precisely why you believe you are an excellent candidate.

You may have to schedule an appointment with them to discuss this. Other items that are helpful to provide your recommendation writer include:

- A list of items/topics to be discussed in your letter (this saves them much work; don't assume they'll remember every detail about you);
- The semester and year you worked with them, names of courses, projects or papers, and other details;
- Submission instructions (including a stamped, addressed envelope(s) if they are required to send it directly to the organization); and
- The exact due date of the recommendation letter(s) and/or when you will pick it up (if they are not mailing it themselves).

When you have a good draft of your application essays ready, send it to the referees. Tell them ahead of time when they should expect this. They should be aware of the specific content of your application when writing their letters in order to adequately address your goals and qualifications and why you are a strong candidate for the particular award. Finally, if there is time before the deadline, ask them to give you feedback on your application.

If the person does not yet have a recommendation for you on file, schedule an appointment with them to discuss the application, your goals, everything that will help them write specifically about you.

Other Helpful Tips

Do not assume because a person is a faculty member or a distinguished person in their field that they know how to write a good recommendation letter. The Scholarships Director has guidelines that can assist professors in this process. She can also contact them directly to advise them about the requirements of certain awards.

Make sure you follow up and remind your referee(s) about the recommendation letters as the deadline approaches.

Be kind enough to let them know the results of the competition, and thank them for their support.