

Guide to college scholarships and grants

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Key takeaways

- College scholarships and hardship grants for college students can help cover the cost of higher education.
- Scholarships tend to be merit-based, while grants are needs-based and can provide emergency cash assistance for college students.
- The FAFSA must be completed to qualify for some grants, but it is also beneficial to work with your school's financial aid office and local organizations to find other opportunities for aid.

Before turning to student loans, it's important to exhaust all other options — including grants and scholarships. Unlike loans, these types of aid do not need to be repaid and can save borrowers thousands of dollars each year. Scholarships and grants for college students can make all the difference in funding one's education, but first you have to qualify.

Grants vs. scholarships

	Must be repaid	No repayment	Need-based	Merit-based
Scholarships		X		X
Grants		X	X	

College scholarship guide

Scholarships are typically awarded to students based on academic or athletic merit, or a special interest shared by both the gifting organization and the student. Given out by colleges, companies, interest groups and nonprofits, scholarships provide an opportunity for many students to pursue

an education more affordably.

Types of scholarships

Many scholarships are awarded based on a student's achievements, talents and interests. So no matter where your skills lie — the classroom, football field or stage, for example — there's likely a scholarship out there for you. Many are even geared toward [unique interests and hobbies](#). Better yet, there's no limit to the number of scholarships you can apply for.

Scholarships may fall under these broad categories:

- **Academic achievement.** Academic scholarships are based on superior grades in the classroom, a high GPA and/or excellent standardized test scores.
- **Arts.** Creative students can search for scholarships geared toward music, visual arts, theater and more.
- **Career, major or industry.** You may find scholarships designed for your expected field of study or career plans.
- **Family background.** Some scholarships are awarded based on a student's traits or background. For example, you can find scholarships designed for first-generation college students, people in the [LGBTQ community](#) and underrepresented minority groups.
- **School-based scholarships.** Most colleges and universities provide their own scholarships as part of their ongoing financial aid programs. Ask your school's financial aid office about your options.
- **Sports.** Many colleges offer athletic scholarships to standout student-athletes who agree to play on the school's team.

How to apply for college scholarships

While some scholarships can be easy to find, there are others that may take some digging. The more obscure scholarships may be even better to apply

for, since obscurity can translate to less competition.

To find and apply for college scholarships, start with these steps:

1. **Search for relevant opportunities.** Try searching for scholarships using specific interests or traits. School guidance counselors and the faculty at your college can point you in the right direction, but you can also use [scholarship databases](#) to find options or explore the websites of local nonprofits or businesses to see if they offer scholarships that apply to you.
2. **Get organized.** Keep a list of scholarships you're researching, along with ones you've applied to, and include the major requirements and deadlines. Then set up a folder to keep your essays, details and documents in one place. Having these ready can help streamline the process.
3. **Apply early and follow all instructions.** While many students search for scholarships during their senior year, you can usually start applying much earlier — so start your search as soon as you can and mind all deadlines. Don't risk disqualification because you didn't read the directions or submit the application on time. Use the instructions as a checklist and check off each item to make sure that you've met requirements.

College grant guide

College grants are typically funded by state and federal governments, colleges and organizations. They are awarded based on a student's demonstrated financial need. Applicants will need to prepare documentation supporting their financial circumstances to qualify.

Types of college grants

The Department of Education offers the most well-known [college grants](#), but you may also find grants through state programs and private organizations.

Common grants include:

- **Federal Pell Grants.** [Pell Grants](#) are awarded to eligible undergraduate students who show exceptional financial need. Pell Grant awards are updated annually, with each student receiving up to \$7,395 for the 2024-25 award year. The award amount depends on your family's expected contribution, your school's cost of attendance and other factors.
- **Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants (FSEOG).** [These grants](#) help undergraduate students with exceptional financial need pay for higher education. You can receive anywhere from \$100 to \$4,000 a year, depending on whether your school participates in the program, available funds, your level of financial need and other factors.
- **Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grants.** [TEACH Grants](#) provide federal grants to students pursuing degrees in education. You may receive up to \$4,000 a year as long as you agree to later teach in a school that serves students from low-income families. But if you don't meet this obligation, the grant turns into a Direct Unsubsidized Loan that you must repay.
- **Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grants.** [These grants](#) are available if your parent or guardian died as a result of serving in Iraq or Afghanistan after Sept. 11, 2001; you were younger than 24 or enrolled in college at least part time when they died; and you can demonstrate financial need. If you qualify, you can receive up to the maximum Pell Grant annual award.
- **State-based grant.** Nearly every state hosts a [financial aid program](#) to help students pay for college. To qualify, most states require you to be a resident, fill out the FAFSA and attend an in-state school. Some states even have [regional tuition exchanges](#), which allow you to pay in-state tuition at a school in a nearby state.
- **Private grants.** You can search for private college grants using the U.S. Department of Labor's [free scholarship and grant search tool](#).

How to apply for a college grant

The process of finding and applying for college grants depends on the type of grant you're pursuing. If you have significant financial need, these are some ways to [pay for college fast](#):

1. **Fill out the FAFSA.** The [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) is your ticket to federal grants, which can often provide thousands of dollars in aid per year. On the FAFSA, you'll provide your family's financial details, which helps your school determine which grants are open to you. It's best to send in your FAFSA early; some grants, like the FSEOG, are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.
2. **Investigate local organizations.** Many organizations offer college grants to local residents with specific backgrounds or high levels of financial need. If you're involved with a community group or a broader organization, ask about potential funding opportunities.
3. **Speak with your school's financial aid office.** If you don't receive as much financial aid as you were expecting, schedule an appointment with the financial aid office of your college. Financial aid officers may be able to help you find additional grant opportunities offered by your school.

What to do when scholarships and grants aren't enough

The current [average cost of attending college](#) is \$38,270 per year, meaning savings, scholarships and grants likely won't cover the entire amount. In the event that you need to bridge the gap, there are two main [types of student loans](#) that can help.

- **Federal student loans.** The first option to look into is [federal student loans](#), backed by the government. These loans have a fixed interest rate — meaning the interest rate doesn't change throughout the life of the

loan. Most also do not require a credit check, and they give you access to benefits and programs that most private student loans don't offer.

- **Private student loans.** While federal student loans are fixed, [private student loan rates](#) can be fixed or variable. A variable rate can shift based on [current student loan interest rates](#) and change throughout the life of the loan.

Frequently asked questions