



9 Ways to Qualify for More Merit Aid

What's the formula for hitting the jackpot when it comes to merit aid?

By Robert Savett, COO, SAGE Scholars | Updated Summer 2020

1. Apply to multiple colleges

Think of your college application process like a stock portfolio. You would never invest all of your savings in just one stock. The same thing goes for applying to colleges- you need to diversify and apply to multiple schools. Remember, not all colleges are going to award you the same amount of merit aid and you can go back to your first choice school and ask them to match the offer made by your second or third choice school. Applying to multiple colleges and universities gives you a very important negotiating power- leverage.

Also, it's important to keep in mind that who qualifies for merit awards can be a bit of a subjective decision. So, don't be too discouraged if your merit aid comes in at a lower amount than you expected. Different colleges will offer different aid amounts, as the process involves an evaluation of where your student fits in the "applicant hierarchy".

2. Invest in an SAT/ACT prep course

The SAT and ACT were created to predict which students would perform best in college. However, the exams are not multi-dimensional and many very successful college students are not the top performers on these tests.

But SAT/ACT excellence continues to be an essential ingredient for acceptance at most selective private colleges and flagship public universities. At private colleges that award merit aid, SAT/ACT performance can be a crucial factor in determining who gets a discount (and how big it is).

Schools want to improve their national rankings. Increasingly, they want to demonstrate higher SAT/ACT scores for incoming freshmen. An SAT/ACT prep course is a solid investment that leads to a greater likelihood of acceptance, more merit aid, and a better financial aid package.

3. Grades matter

You can take a good report card to the bank when it comes to merit aid. The higher the grades, the higher the merit aid, so it's important that students do their best in high school so it will pay off in college.

4. Take AP courses

Taking AP course shows admissions officers that you are not afraid of hard work. So it makes sense that more merit aid goes to students who show a willingness to be challenged by taking Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors courses.

5. Complete applications on time

If a portion (or all) of the application is late, your student may not qualify for merit aid, or receive less than they would have otherwise. Also, by missing a deadline, your student creates the impression that the college is not their top choice.

6. Schedule an interview and prepare

Know the school's strengths. Be able to articulate why you're applying to the college and why it's a good fit for you. A strong interview can improve the merit award. It's wonderful to have an admission officer in your corner.

7. Superb essays and recommendations

Excellent essays and strong personal recommendations get a candidate noticed! This is where you demonstrate your individuality—and shine.



8. Geographical diversity

Colleges want a diverse freshman class, and often give more merit aid to students who live farther away. Merit aid encourages more out-of-state applicants to attend.

9. Fill out the FAFSA

On the FAFSA form, students specify the other colleges where they're applying. Now, each college knows who the competitors are. This alone can significantly improve awards! Filling out the FAFSA also indicates to the college that, even if need is low, a bit of extra help is important to your family.