



Scholarship Committee Handbook

Revised May 2026

Welcome to The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina's scholarship programs!

CFWNC currently administers approximately 50 scholarship programs, which collectively award more than 100 scholarships exceeding \$500,000 annually. We rely heavily on our volunteer advisory committee members to review applications thoroughly and thoughtfully.

While awards are primarily available to students within the eighteen westernmost counties of North Carolina, a few programs reach beyond our region as well. Some scholarships are restricted to schools within the UNC consolidated system or to a specific institution, but most allow recipients to attend any accredited nonprofit higher education institution within the United States.

CFWNC conducts outreach to high school counselors in our region, who then share information about our scholarships with their students. To apply for a scholarship, students must create an account in SmarterSelect, our scholarship software, and complete an online application. CFWNC staff screens student applications for eligibility and completeness, and then assists scholarship committee members with their review of applications.

Committee members will review and rank scholarship applications online through SmarterSelect to ensure that all students receive consistent and objective evaluations. Our Scholarship Directory, available on our website, lists all scholarships that we currently offer and provides information regarding the number and amount of awards, eligibility, and criteria.

Committees throughout the region, which may include school officials, community volunteers, donor advisors, and CFWNC Board members, select and recommend scholarship recipients to CFWNC. Each committee has at least three members, and award recommendations are based on the majority support of committee members.

This handbook reflects our long experience with administering scholarship programs. We have implemented procedures that work well administratively, meet IRS requirements, fulfill the intent of our donors, and meet the needs of our students. We have also incorporated ideas learned from other community foundations and organizations making scholarship awards, and from previous scholarship advisory committees.

Please reach out to us if you have ideas to improve our scholarship policies and procedures. Your involvement keeps us in touch with student needs in your community. As a scholarship advisory committee member, your time and commitment to this process are crucial and much appreciated.

Thank you for joining CFWNC in providing access to higher education for Western North Carolina students!

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I. Introduction

A. CFWNC Scholarship Program Information

The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, a public charity established in 1978, enables generous people to make gifts to benefit our 18-county region including the Qualla Boundary. The many individual funds and endowments established at CFWNC provide grants to nonprofit organizations working to address community needs and scholarships to assist students with the significant costs of higher education. Gifts to CFWNC are tax deductible.

In 1991, CFWNC established its first endowed scholarship and is pleased to make scholarship assistance available to students throughout Western North Carolina.

Scholarships are available to students located in one of the following eighteen western North Carolina counties: Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania, Yancey and the Qualla Boundary. CFWNC administers a variety of scholarship funds that may require students to attend a specific high school, pursue a particular field of study, attend a specific institution or live in a particular county or region. A few scholarships are offered to students outside CFWNC's 18-county region.

Each scholarship will list its eligibility requirements on the scholarship directory on our website. Scholarships are awarded without regard to race, creed, sex, sexual orientation, ethnic background or handicap, unless a specific restriction or preference is clearly stated.

Generally, awards are made to students who will attend an accredited nonprofit college, university, community college or vocational school within the U.S. on a full-time basis in the fall following the award.

Applications for scholarship programs administered by CFWNC are available through our website (cfwnc.org).

B. Our 18-County Region of Western North Carolina



C. Scholarship Policies

Detailed information regarding CFWNC's scholarship policies (including Administration, Fund Types, General Payment Guidelines, Committees, Evaluation and Awards, Guidelines and Forms) is contained in the Scholarship Policies Manual, which is available upon request from the Foundation.

II. The Role of a Scholarship Advisory Committee Member

Committee members have an important role in ensuring that the original intent of the scholarship fund is followed. We value you as a steward of the fund and its purpose. As such, you have a responsibility to participate actively in the scholarship selection process.

Since most Scholarship Advisory Committees review applications (or meet) only once each year, your participation is critical. Some committees' members work independently and submit their reviews to the Foundation online. Others meet in person or virtually. In either case, we will make materials available to you in a timely fashion. You will also be asked to complete a Conflict of Interest disclosure form as a part of our required efforts to ensure fairness in the scholarship process. As a Scholarship Advisory Committee member, we ask that you make CFWNC aware of any concerns or questions about the scholarship process that may arise in your community.

Scholarship Advisory Committee members serve one-year terms. At the discretion of CFWNC, members may be asked to return to the same committee in subsequent years or to rotate onto a different committee (periodic membership changes help keep committees energized and encourage broad community participation). Scholarship Advisory Committee members may request rotation to another committee; if this appeals to you, please ask about other opportunities. We invite and appreciate your suggestions of others to serve on your or other scholarship advisory committees.

III. Committee Review Considerations

Scholarship Advisory Committees make decisions and recommendations about award recipients in accordance with terms set forth in the relevant fund agreement and specific guidelines prepared to ensure that each scholarship recipient is selected on a fair and objective basis. Scholarships should be awarded without regard to race, creed, sex, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background or disability, unless a specific restriction or preference is clearly stated in the Fund Agreement.

CFWNC promotes fairness for all people from all backgrounds. Scholarship Advisory Committee members should treat all applicants with respect and approach this work without any prejudice toward any scholarship candidate, regardless of personal traits or characteristics other than those set forth in the relevant scholarship guidelines.

In reviewing applications and interviewing students, Scholarship Advisory Committee members should consider their possible biases and seek to make scholarship recommendations that do not reflect those biases. When interviewing applicants, Scholarship Advisory Committee members should avoid making assumptions based on an individual's race, gender, sex, sexual orientation or disability in interview questions and comments.

IV. Applications and Evaluation

A. Application Process

The majority of our programs assist graduating public high school seniors. Applications are available online beginning in November. Guidance counselors at participating schools let their students know applications are available. In general, our donors have entrusted us to identify and assist students with strong academic performance and aptitude, good moral character, and a history of community/school involvement. Most CFWNC scholarship programs also require evidence of financial need.

B. Determining Financial Need

Because so many factors influence an applicant's financial need, there is no universally applied assessment tool. The CFWNC application used for programs that consider financial need asks students to provide a snapshot of their parents' and their own financial resources, including information about family size, income, and cash available. Applicants may also be asked to provide us with a copy of their FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Submission Summary. The Submission Summary includes an SAI (Student Aid Index) that, based on federal methodology, represents an estimated level of financial need for the student. In addition to the snapshot, we invite students to include a "Supplementary Financial Statement" to bring to our attention any financial circumstances not already evident (some examples are unusual medical expenses or additional family members currently attending college).

When considering financial need, it is helpful to begin by comparing the resources of students competing for the same award. Often, by comparing family size and income for students in the same applicant pool, a pattern of need emerges. For example, at least on the surface, a family of 4 with a \$30,000 income exhibits a higher need than a family of 4 with a \$50,000 income. If, however, the latter family has, for instance, a disabled parent and a sibling already in college, then fewer resources would be available for the rising college freshman. We ask that you use your best judgment to determine whether an applicant will be able to attend college without financial assistance. While the financial information submitted by the student is very important, it does not always reflect unusual circumstances or demands on family resources that are described in the Supplementary Financial Statements submitted by some students. Please consider both when evaluating need.

While we are pleased that many generous donors have chosen to establish scholarship funds here at CFWNC, we do not have adequate funds to assist all students in need of aid. It is important, therefore, that when applicants are qualified in all criteria, preference should be given to those applicants with significant financial need *unless financial need is explicitly excluded from the criteria*.

C. Assessing Community/School Involvement

Applications for CFWNC scholarship programs often ask applicants to provide information about their school and community activities such as clubs, athletics, academic teams, volunteer work, or paid work. Students who find ways to be involved in a variety of activities demonstrate their well-roundedness and their commitment to building and strengthening their communities. Some committee members might assess involvement by the number of hours devoted to all activities; others look more closely at the variety of activities or depth of involvement in each. Application reviewers should remember that a student who participates heavily in only a handful of activities is not necessarily less involved than one who has a long list of smaller time and energy contributions – quantity is not the issue, so much as the spirit of involvement. Many students also have jobs; time spent working will affect their ability to serve in the community. Sometimes those jobs are required to help support the family or to cover the student's personal expenses. Students should not be penalized for work obligations.

Another item to consider is whether a candidate lives in an urban or rural area. Students who ride a bus 15 miles to school may not have access to transportation required for after-school activities, while students who live in other locations may be able to walk or ride a city bus. Students from smaller, more rural communities – even if they do have transportation – may simply have fewer opportunities for involvement. Again, we hope our committee members will consider a student's whole picture in evaluating whether that student has made an effort to be involved.

D. Interviewing Candidates

Some committees interview candidates as part of the selection process. Depending on the number of applicants, it may be possible to interview all candidates or a short-list of finalists. CFWNC staff will manage interview schedules and assist the advisory committee in developing an interview process aligned with the relevant scholarship fund's criteria. Generally, interviews last 10-20 minutes, and they work best when designed as a discussion rather than an evaluation. The best interview questions invite explanation beyond a simple “yes” or “no.” CFWNC staff will assist the committee by providing a list of potential questions and ensuring the timely commencement and ending of the interview.

Unless the scholarship criteria specifically require in-state public school attendance as a requirement, award decisions should not be influenced by the student's college choice. For some students, the smaller size of a private college may be a more appropriate environment to foster success than a less expensive but much larger school. Student success is the goal of our scholarship programs, and committee members should not substitute their preferences for those of the applicants.

Please be sensitive in choosing and wording questions and avoid asking about personal issues not affecting award eligibility. If a delicate subject warrants further scrutiny, questions should be crafted in a gentle and non-threatening manner. Whenever possible, asking a question that will prompt the student to volunteer information is preferred.

E. Publicizing Awards

After CFWNC approves the Scholarship Advisory Committee's award recommendations, CFWNC staff will notify applicants and their schools of the selections, and also prepare and distribute press releases to regional newspapers. If you would like to coordinate a local announcement of your awards, please contact us first to ensure that CFWNC has approved the committee's recommendations and to coordinate your local publicity efforts with our Communications Director. Please send copies of all coverage to CFWNC for our records.

F. Other Resources

We do not currently have any unrestricted scholarship funds to help students who do not qualify for established CFWNC scholarships. When students contact us to request assistance other than through our established programs, we refer them to other resources to help in their aid search.

V. **Annual Scholarship Schedule**

The schedule below applies to the majority of our scholarship programs. This is a guide, and actual timelines may vary. CFWNC staff will communicate with scholarship committee members regarding their responsibilities throughout the process.

November: CFWNC makes scholarship applications available to students for the upcoming year and conducts outreach to high school counselors.

December: CFWNC conducts outreach to scholarship committee members to determine participation for the upcoming year.

January/February: CFWNC reviews scholarship applications for eligibility and completeness and makes scholarship applications available to *school committees* for review (if required by scholarship program).

February/March: CFWNC makes scholarship applications available to *scholarship committees* for review (dates vary by scholarship program).

March/April: Scholarship committee review is conducted and finalized (dates vary by scholarship program). If required by the program, scholarship committees conduct selection meetings and interviews to select recipients (dates vary by committee). As recipients are selected, CFWNC notifies both recipients and non-recipients. After all recipients have been selected, a finalized list of all recipients is provided to high school counselors.

May: Scholarship committee selections are presented to the CFWNC Board.

May/June: Scholarship recipients submit required documents to CFWNC.

July: CFWNC processes scholarship payments to educational institutions.