2026 Scholarship Program Benchmark Report

A Data-Informed View of Program Structure, Scale and Administration

Introduction

Every scholarship program reflects a distinct mission, audience and organizational priority. Yet program leaders often face many of the same questions:

1. *Is our application process working as intended?*
2. *Are we reaching the right applicants and helping them complete the process?*
3. *Does our award structure support the impact we want to create?*
4. *Are our review and selection practices efficient, equitable and scalable?*
5. *Where could the program become more accessible or easier to manage?*

These questions are difficult to answer without an external point of reference. **The 2026 Scholarship Program Benchmark Report** draws on operational data from hundreds of scholarship programs administered by ISTS. It provides a comparative view of application activity, award design, accessibility, continued funding and selection practices.

The goal is not to establish one ideal model for every program. It is to help scholarship sponsors compare their current approach, identify meaningful questions and make more informed decisions before the next cycle.

At a Glance

Across the full application-volume dataset

485 scholarship programs

646,057 total applications

Average application window

85 days

Average scholarship award

$3,181

Maximum scholarship award represented

$30,000

Additional findings include:

- **43% of programs** offered renewal or reapplication
- **29% allowed** international applicants
- **13% offered** at least one language beyond English
- **29% used** a more tailored selection approach
- **5% included** a semifinalist stage

Individual benchmarks reflect the subset of programs for which each data point was available.

1. Application Reach and Completion

646,057 Applications Across 485 Programs

Scholarship programs vary dramatically in scale. The highest-volume program in the dataset received just over **147,000 applications,** while many programs served much smaller and more defined audiences.

The highest-volume program segment represented approximately **18% of programs,** but accounted for nearly **90% of all applications.**

However, volume alone does not tell the full story.

The highest-volume segment had an average completion rate of **43.21%,** compared with **51.08%** among the lowest-volume group.

This does not mean that higher application volume causes lower completion. Larger programs may attract broader audiences, include more complex eligibility requirements or generate interest from applicants who do not ultimately qualify.

It does show why sponsors should evaluate application reach and application progression together.

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A larger applicant pool does not automatically indicate a stronger applicant experience.

A widening difference between applications started and completed may point to:

- Eligibility confusion
- Lengthy or complex requirements
- Documentation barriers
- Limited applicant follow-up
- Applicants beginning before confirming that they qualify

Questions to Consider

- What percentage of applicants complete the process?
- Where are applicants most likely to stop?
- Are incomplete applicants qualified but disengaged, or primarily ineligible?
- Does every application requirement contribute meaningfully to the selection decision?

2. Application Timing

Average Application Window: 85 Days

Across the programs represented, the average application remained open for approximately 12 weeks.

That timeframe can give applicants sufficient opportunity to understand the requirements, gather documentation and complete written responses - but the length of the window is only one part of the experience.

A longer application period does not compensate for unclear eligibility, difficult requirements or limited communication.

Sponsors should consider whether the application timeline reflects:

- The amount of work required
- The availability of transcripts, recommendations or other documents
- The timing of promotional outreach
- When applicants typically begin the process
- Whether reminder communications encourage completion

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The right application window is not simply the longest one. It is the window that gives qualified applicants enough time and support to complete the process successfully.

3. Award Design and Funding Model

Average Award: $3,180.68 / Maximum Award: $30,000

Award amounts vary based on program mission, recipient population, available funding and the number of scholarships offered.

An average can provide context, but it should not become a default target. The more important question is whether the award meaningfully advances the outcome the sponsor wants to create.

A program focused on broad access may prioritize a larger number of moderate awards. A program supporting advanced study, specialized credentials or significant financial need may choose fewer, larger awards.

First-Dollar and Last-Dollar Models

Among 211 programs with available funding-model data:

- **69.67% used a first-dollar model**
- **30.33% used a last-dollar model**

First-dollar scholarships are generally applied without requiring applicants to exhaust other sources of aid first. They may offer greater certainty and simpler administration.

Last-dollar scholarships are generally designed to fill a remaining financial gap after other assistance has been considered. They may help sponsors target unmet need, but can also require more documentation, verification and timing coordination.

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- Award amount and funding model should be evaluated together.
- Sponsors should consider both the intended depth of support and the administrative experience required to deliver it.

Questions to Consider

- Is the award meaningful relative to the expense it is intended to offset?
- Is the program designed to maximize reach, depth of support or both?
- Does the funding model create uncertainty or delay for applicants?
- Is the administrative complexity justified by the intended allocation of funds?

4. Access and Applicant Support

International Eligibility

Among 222 programs with available international eligibility data:

- **28.83% allowed international applicants**
- **71.17% did not**

International eligibility may be influenced by program mission, geographic focus, employment relationships, tax considerations, institution eligibility and disbursement capabilities.

Expanding eligibility requires more than opening the application to additional countries. Sponsors must also consider whether verification, communication, support and payment processes can serve applicants consistently.

Multilingual Access

Among 216 programs with available language data:

- **87.5% were offered in English**
- **7.87% included Spanish**
- **4.17% included French Canadian**
- **0.46% included Thai**

Combined, **12.5% offered at least one language beyond English.**

This represents a meaningful and growing area of scholarship program accessibility.

The percentage alone does not capture every way multilingual audiences may be supported. Some applicants may be comfortable completing an application in English but benefit significantly from receiving guidance, answers and applicant support in their native language.

Sponsors should evaluate the full applicant experience, including:

- Promotional information
- Eligibility guidance
- FAQ documents and instructions
- Applicant communications
- Support for questions
- Award notifications

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Language access is not limited to translating the application.

- The most valuable multilingual support depends on who the eligible audience is, what barriers they experience and where language support can improve awareness, participation and confidence.

Questions to Consider

- What languages are most common among the eligible population?
- Could limited participation be connected to language or communication barriers?
- Would applicants benefit most from a translated application, multilingual support or both?
- Can critical communications and applicant questions be handled consistently?
- Is the administrative complexity justified by the intended allocation of funds?

5. Renewals and Continued Aid

Among 222 programs with available data:

- **42.79% offered renewal or reapplication**
- **57.21% did not**

One-time awards remain more common, but a substantial share of programs offer recipients or prior applicants an opportunity for continued funding.

Renewable awards may support persistence and deepen long-term impact. They also require sponsors to plan for:

- Continued eligibility
- Academic progress
- Required documentation
- Maximum award duration
- Multi-year funding commitments
- Renewal timing and communications

Reapplication provides another model. It allows recipients or past applicants to compete again without creating an automatic future obligation.

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Continued funding should reflect both the program's mission and its ability to sustain the commitment.

Questions to Consider

- Is multi-year support important to the outcome the program is designed to achieve?
- Are renewal requirements clear and manageable?
- Can the sponsor sustain future funding commitments?
- Would reapplication provide a better balance of continuity and flexibility?

6. Review and Selection Design

Selection is not only about who reviews applications. It also includes the criteria, scoring methodology, number of stages and degree of judgment required.

Among 209 programs with available selection-process data:

- **71.29% used a more streamlined selection model**
- **28.71% used a more tailored evaluation model**

Among 222 programs:

- **4.95% included a semifinalist stage**
- **95.05% did not**

Among 209 programs with evaluator data:

- **60.29% did not use a formal selection committee**
- **18.18% used ISTS Candidate Evaluators**
- **15.79% used an internal client selection committee**

Streamlined Evaluation

A more streamlined process may use clearly defined criteria, objective calculations and a consistent rubric to rank applicants.

This approach can support:

- Greater consistency
- Clearer reviewer training
- More predictable timelines
- Easier governance
- Reduced administrative burden

Tailored Evaluation

Some programs require multiple evaluation layers, specialized expertise or scoring that balances factors such as academics, extracurricular involvement, financial need and written responses.

These approaches can support the program's distinct mission, but they also require:

- Qualified reviewers
- Clear evaluation guidance
- Consistent scoring standards
- Defined weighting
- Appropriate conflict-of-interest controls
- Transparent and equitable decision parameters

Semifinalist Stages

A semifinalist stage may be appropriate when a smaller group needs to provide additional documentation, participate in interviews or receive deeper evaluation.

However, another stage also increases applicant effort, lengthens the timeline and adds administrative work.

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Every additional criterion, reviewer or stage should improve the quality, fairness or confidence of the outcome.

Questions to Consider

- Are the evaluation criteria clearly connected to the program's goals?
- Is scoring consistent across reviewers?
- Does the program have sufficient review capacity?
- Is every review stage necessary?
- Would trained independent evaluators improve scalability or confidence?
- Can the selection methodology be explained clearly to applicants and stakeholders?

What the Benchmarks Reveal

1. Reach and Completion Must Be Evaluated Together

Application volume measures awareness and interest. Completion helps reveal whether qualified applicants can successfully move through the process.

2. Complexity Should Be Intentional

Specialized requirements, multiple review stages and tailored funding models may be appropriate, but each should serve a clear program objective.

3. Accessibility Extends Beyond Eligibility

A program may be open to a broader population without fully supporting that population through language, communications, verification and applicant service.

4. Scale Changes Operational Needs

Higher volume programs often require different workflows, stronger communications, better data visibility and more scalable review resources.

5. Program Design Should Continue to Evolve

Benchmarks offer a point of comparison. Strong program decisions also consider applicant feedback, sponsor priorities, operational performance and recipient outcomes.

Turning the Benchmark Into Action

Sponsors can use the findings to review their program across four areas.

Reach

- Application starts
- Eligible applicant participation
- Audience and geographic reach

Experience

- Completion rate
- Applicant questions
- Abandonment points
- Time and effort required

Administration

- Internal staff time
- Manual processes
- Review capacity
- Exceptions and cycle timing

Impact

- Number and size of awards
- Continued recipient support
- Program objective attainment
- Sponsor and stakeholder confidence

The value of a benchmark is not simply knowing how a program compares. It is understanding which differences are intentional, which may be limiting performance and where change could create a stronger experience.

Closing

Every scholarship program serves a distinct mission and community. The goal is not to make every program look the same; it is to determine whether the current structure helps the organization achieve its purpose efficiently, equitably and at scale.

ISTS partners with organizations across the scholarship program lifecycle, including application design, applicant support, eligibility verification, review and selection, communications, disbursement, reporting and ongoing program strategy.