

National Merit Scholarship Program

The National Merit® Scholarship Program is an academic competition for recognition and scholarships that began in 1955. High school students enter the National Merit Program by taking the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test ([PSAT/NMSQT®](#))—which serves as an initial screen of approximately 1.6 million entrants each year—and by meeting published program entry and participation requirements.

Student Entry Requirements

To participate in the National Merit® Scholarship Program, a student must:

1. take the [PSAT/NMSQT®](#) in the specified year of the high school program and no later than the third year in grades 9 through 12, *regardless of grade classification or educational pattern*;
2. be enrolled as a high school student (traditional or homeschooled), progressing normally toward graduation or completion of high school, and planning to accept admission to college no later than the fall following completion of high school; and
3. be a citizen of the United States; or be a U.S. lawful permanent resident (or have applied for permanent residence, the application for which has not been denied) and intend to become a U.S. citizen at the earliest opportunity allowed by law.

Not yet a U.S. citizen? Click [here](#) for documentation required from scholarship candidates who have not yet become U.S. citizens. ([Adobe Acrobat Reader](#) is required.)

The student's responses to items on the PSAT/NMSQT answer sheet that are specific to NMSC program entry determine whether the individual meets requirements to participate in the National Merit Scholarship Program. Click [here](#) to see NMSC program entry items on the PSAT/NMSQT answer sheet. Score reports provided for test takers and their schools indicate whether the student meets program entry requirements. A school official or the student should report immediately to NMSC any error or change in reported information that may affect participation.

Program Recognition

Of the 1.6 million entrants, some 50,000 with the highest [PSAT/NMSQT®](#) Selection Index scores (calculated by doubling the sum of the Reading, Writing and Language, and Math Test scores) qualify for recognition in the National Merit® Scholarship Program. In September, these high scorers are notified through their schools that they have qualified as either a Commended Student or Semifinalist.

Commended Students

In late September, more than two-thirds (about 34,000) of the approximately 50,000 high scorers on the [PSAT/NMSQT®](#) receive Letters of Commendation in recognition of their outstanding academic promise. Commended Students are named on the basis of a nationally applied Selection Index score that may vary from year to year and is typically below the level required for participants to be named Semifinalists in their respective states. Although Commended Students do not continue in the competition for National Merit® Scholarships, some of these students do become candidates for Special Scholarships sponsored by corporations and businesses.

Semifinalists

In early September, about 16,000 students, or approximately one-third of the 50,000 high scorers, are notified that they have qualified as Semifinalists. To ensure that academically talented young people from all parts of the United States are included in this talent pool, Semifinalists are designated on a state-representational basis. They are the highest scoring entrants in each state. NMSC provides scholarship application materials to Semifinalists through their high schools. To be considered for a National Merit® Scholarship, Semifinalists must advance to Finalist standing in the competition by meeting high academic standards and all other requirements explained in the information provided to each Semifinalist. Click [here](#) to learn about requirements for becoming a Finalist in the 2018 National Merit Scholarship Program. (Adobe Acrobat Reader is required.)

Finalists

In February, some 15,000 Semifinalists are notified by mail at their home addresses that they have advanced to Finalist standing. High school principals are notified and provided with a certificate to present to each Finalist.

Winner Selection

All winners of Merit Scholarship® awards (Merit Scholar® designees) are chosen from the Finalist group based on their abilities, skills, and accomplishments—without regard to gender, race, ethnic origin, or religious preference. A variety of information is available for NMSC selectors to evaluate: the Finalist's academic record, information about the school's curricula and grading system, two sets of test scores, the high school official's written recommendation, information about the student's activities and leadership, and the Finalist's own essay.

Types of Merit Scholarship® Awards

Beginning in March and continuing to mid-June, NMSC notifies approximately 7,500 Finalists at their home addresses that they have been selected to receive a Merit Scholarship® award. Merit Scholarship awards are of three types:

- **National Merit® \$2500 Scholarships**
Every Finalist competes for these single payment scholarships, which are awarded on a state-representational basis. Winners are selected without consideration of family financial circumstances, college choice, or major and career plans.
- **[Corporate-sponsored Merit Scholarship awards](#)**
Corporate sponsors designate their awards for children of their employees or members, for residents of a community where a company has operations, or for Finalists with career plans the sponsor wishes to encourage. These scholarships may either be renewable for four years of undergraduate study or one-time awards.
- **[College-sponsored Merit Scholarship awards](#)**
Officials of each sponsor college select winners of their awards from Finalists who have been accepted for admission and have informed NMSC by the published deadlines that the sponsor college or university is their first choice. These awards are renewable for up to four years of undergraduate study. The published deadlines for reporting a sponsor college as first choice can be viewed on page 3 of the [Requirements and Instructions for Semifinalists in the 2018 National Merit® Scholarship Program](#). (Adobe Acrobat Reader is required.)

Merit Scholarship awards are supported by some 420 independent sponsors and by NMSC's own funds. Sponsor organizations include corporations and businesses, company foundations, professional associations, and colleges and universities.

Special Scholarships

Every year some 1,200 National Merit® Program participants, who are outstanding but not Finalists, are awarded Special Scholarships provided by corporations and business organizations. To be considered for a Special Scholarship, students must meet the sponsor's criteria and the entry requirements of the National Merit Scholarship Program. They also must submit an entry form to the sponsor organization. Subsequently, NMSC contacts a pool of high-scoring candidates through their respective high schools. These students and their school officials submit detailed scholarship applications. NMSC's professional staff evaluates information about candidates' abilities, skills, and accomplishments and chooses winners of the sponsor's Special Scholarships. These scholarships may either be renewable for four years of undergraduate study or one-time awards.

A list of corporate organizations that sponsor National Merit® Scholarships and/or Special Scholarships is given in the [PSAT/NMSQT® Student Guide](#).