

How Can Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors Assist in Locating College Scholarships

When assisting consumers attending college as they develop the skills and credentials necessary for their career goals, it's essential to identify comparable benefits, such as scholarships. Scholarships play a crucial role in funding their education, yet locating suitable options can be daunting and time-consuming. As a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, your guidance in navigating the scholarship landscape is critical to consumers working toward their career goals. It maximizes comparable benefits and reduces the student's financial burden.

Five things to consider as your support consumer in identifying scholarships:

1. Make strong connections with the colleges' Disability Resource Office.

While financial aid offices are valuable resources, Disability Resource Offices are often aware of specific scholarships for students with disabilities, including endowed scholarships that may not be widely advertised. Build strong relationships with the directors of these offices and inquire annually about any institutional and donor-funded scholarships available for students with documented disabilities.

2. Identify local, low-competition scholarships.

National scholarships offered by large corporations and organizations often receive thousands of applications. It's easy to feel overwhelmed and burnt out from writing scholarship applications that may not yield much success. Instead, consider looking for local scholarships through service clubs (e.g., Rotary), disability organizations, and credit unions. These opportunities typically have higher win rates and may offer more flexibility in how the funds can be used, which can help cover some of the costs that VR might not be able to address for college.

3. Create a database of national disability-focused scholarships.

National scholarships can be very competitive, so it's important to maintain an up-to-date database of scholarships that may offer a better chance of success. After you build this database, organize it by disability type or other eligibility criteria. This will allow you to provide individualized scholarship guidance and minimize wasted time.

4. Help develop a scholarship essay bank.

Students often feel burnt out from repeatedly writing scholarship essays. Assist them in crafting several distinct essays on topics such as educational and career goals, overcoming obstacles and demonstrating self-determination, and financial need and impact. This approach will provide students with essays that they can mix and match to apply for a variety of scholarships.

5. Watch out for scholarship pitfalls.

Completing a scholarship application shouldn't require a fee. Legitimate scholarships are free, with only a few exceptions, such as accessing a member-only scholarship when you are not a member. Additionally, be aware of the scholarship displacement policy. Non-institutional scholarships can reduce the institutional financial aid package. It's important to ask the financial aid office whether securing a scholarship will reduce institutional grants or student loans.