D6: Helping Students Find and Win Private Scholarships

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About the Speaker

- **Mark Kantrowitz is a nationally-recognized expert on student financial aid and scholarships**
- **Mark is publisher of Fastweb.com, the largest free scholarship matching service**
- **Mark is a member of the board of directors of the National Scholarship Providers Association**
- **Mark has been quoted in more than 1,200 different newspaper and magazine articles in the last 12 months**
- **Mark is the author of the Amazon.com bestseller *Secrets to Winning a Scholarship***
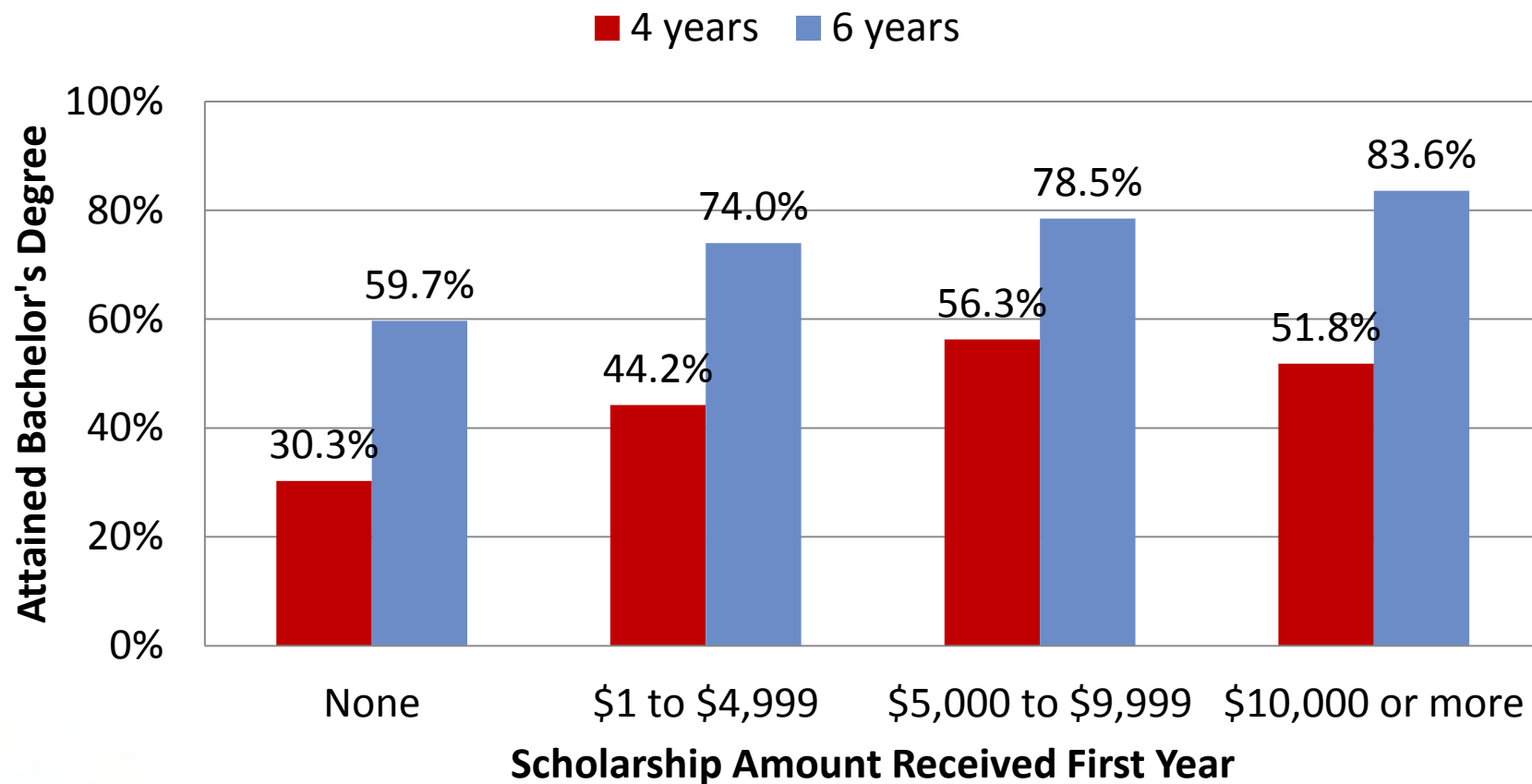
Why Help Students Win Scholarships?

- **It helps the students**
  - Private scholarships help students succeed in college by reducing their loan and work burden
  - Scholarship winners are more likely to graduate
  - Students who graduate with no debt are twice as likely to go on to graduate school
- **It helps the school**
  - When students win prestigious national scholarships, it enhances the school's reputation
  - Private scholarships can supplement a college's own financial aid funds, stretching limited institutional funds further

Who Wins Scholarships?

- **Very few students win a completely free ride**
  - Of students enrolled full-time at a 4-year college 0.3% get enough grants and scholarships to cover the full cost of attendance
  - 3.4% get enough to cover 75% or more of the cost of attendance
  - 14.3% get enough to cover 50% or more of the cost of attendance
  - Of students winning scholarships, more than two-thirds (69.1%) received less than $2,500
- **Students majoring in STEM fields are more likely to win scholarships**
- **Students with better grades are more likely to win scholarships**
- **Students with above-average test scores are more likely to win scholarships**

How to Increase Number of Applicants

- **Ask faculty/staff/parents to encourage individual students to apply for specific scholarships**
  - To be effective, the encouragement must be personal, one-on-one and not part of a group announcement
  - Provide faculty with a list of scholarships that are relevant to their field of expertise and department
  - Faculty and staff can also identify students who are good candidates for winning scholarships
- **Track statistics on who has won scholarships and publicize lists of winners of prestigious awards through posters and other promotions**
  - This will create a culture of winning, where students are expected to enter and take pride in the school

Work with Your Student Newspaper

- **Provide the student newspaper with a monthly list of the most prestigious, most generous and most unusual scholarships with upcoming deadlines**
- **Write an advice column to provide tips for winning scholarships, profiles of past winners**
- **Send a press release to the newspaper whenever a student wins a major scholarship**
- **If newspaper isn't interested, create your own scholarships newsletter**
  - Create a mailing list and/or Facebook group for interested students
  - Also create a parent newsletter, since they are a key influencer

Motivate Students to Apply for Awards

- **Create a "Winner's Circle" scholarship available only to students from your school who have applied for and won scholarships**
- **Colleges can adopt a more favorable outside scholarship policy that ensures that the students benefit financially from winning a scholarship, such as one in which**
  - Private scholarships first fill unmet need (gap)
  - Private scholarships reduce loan and work burden before reducing institutional need-based grants
  - Provide other benefits to winners, such as first choice of dormitory, ability to work with prestigious faculty, discounts in campus bookstore, perhaps as part of an Honors program

Scholarship Outreach Tips

- **Post local and important scholarships to a bulletin board outside your office**
    - This includes PTA scholarships, Dollars for Scholars, scholarships by local businesses, scholarships awarded by your school
    - Public libraries also post local scholarships to bulletin boards near the jobs and careers section
- **Create a scholarships web page on the school's web site to list internal and external scholarships, FAQs, resources**
- **Hold a financial aid night**
- **Explain the benefits of winning a scholarship**
- **Create a scholarship coordinator position**

Start Searching for Scholarships ASAP

- **Most families wait until the spring of the senior year of high school to start searching for scholarships, missing half the deadlines during the senior year alone**
- **Many scholarships are available to students in younger grades**
- **There are even scholarships for children in grades K-8**
  - Examples: National Spelling Bee, National Geography Bee, National History Day Competition, Scholarship for Mibsters, Jif Peanut Butter
  - Many art, writing and community service awards
  - These scholarships are not listed in the online scholarship databases because of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)
  - FinAid has a comprehensive list at www.finaid.org/age13
- **Students who win scholarships are more likely to enroll in college**

Increase the Number of Matches

- **To win more scholarships, increase the number of applications**
  - It's a bit of a numbers game, random choice of winner
  - Even among the most talented students, winning involves a combination of skill and luck
  - Persistence pays: Students who win many awards have many more rejections than wins
  - You can't win if you don't apply
- **Search offline in addition to online**
  - Online searches are targeted, offline more exploratory
  - Scholarship listing books in the library (copyright < 2 years old)
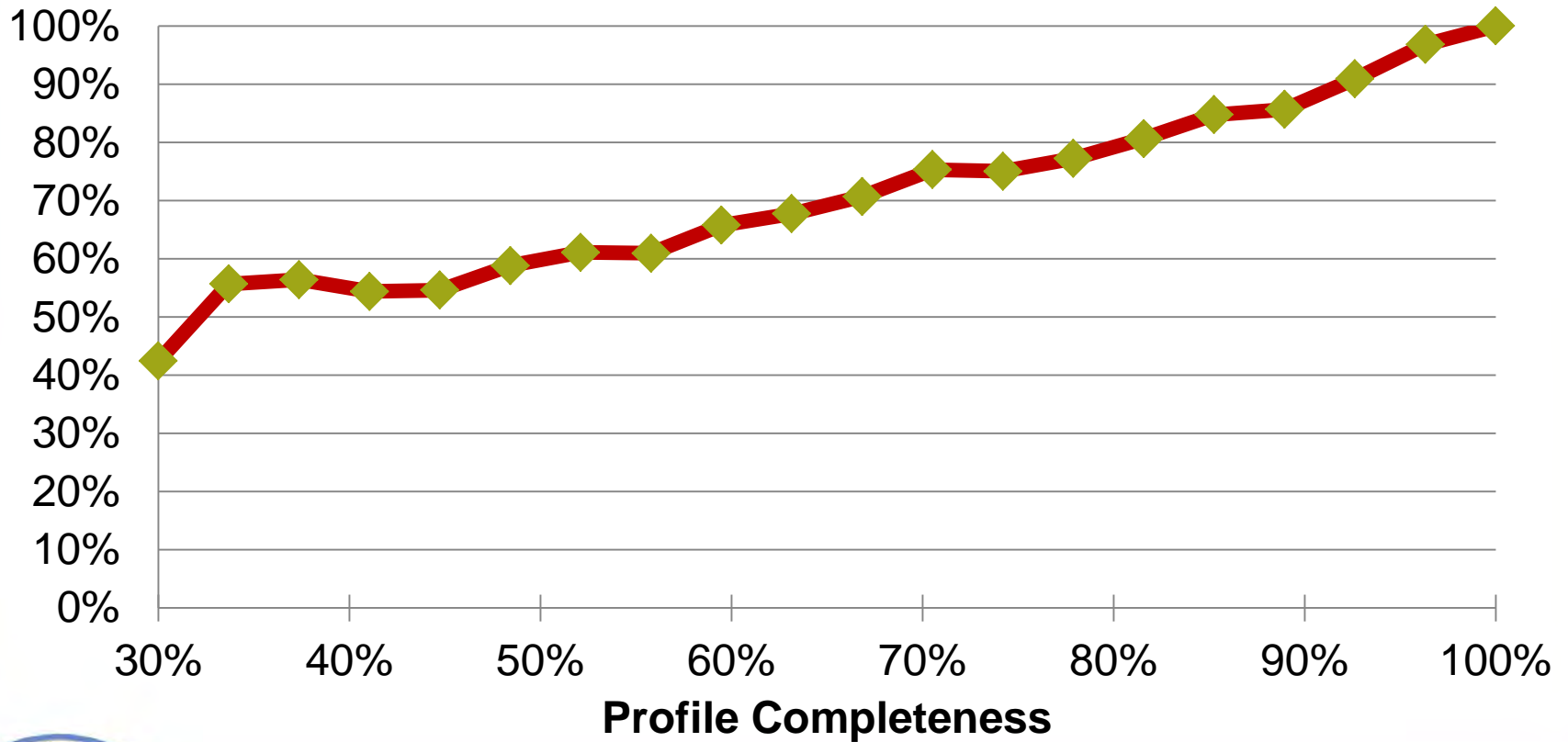 - Coupon section of the Sunday newspaper

Use Scholarship Sites Effectively

- **Encourage students to answer all of the optional questions in the scholarship matching service's personal background profile**
  - Students who answer all of the optional questions match about twice as many scholarships as students who answer only the required questions, on average
  - The optional questions are there to trigger the inclusion of specific awards in the search results.
- **Ask your IT staff to white list the award and deadline notification email messages; messages about money are often treated as spam**
- **Suggest students search two or more of the free scholarship matching sites, such as Fastweb and a competitor (College Board, Peterson's)**
  - The high degree of overlap in the matches makes the students less likely to fall prey to scams

Profile Completeness Matters

Percent of Potential Matches

Profile Completeness

How to Increase Chances of Winning

- **Conduct workshops on a variety of topics**
- **Have staff read the essays and provide individual feedback and suggestions**
- **Enlist older winners to mentor younger students**
- **Ask scholarship provider for reviewer comments**
  - Students who apply again after addressing the comments are much more likely to win the award
- **Provide wisdom on what works and what doesn't**
- **Remind students of upcoming deadlines**
- **Improve scores on standardized tests through test prep classes and tutoring**

Review Student's Online Presence

- About a quarter of scholarship providers are now reviewing the online presence of their finalists, so you should too

- An unprofessional online appearance can cause a student to lose a scholarship, since scholarship providers may worry about a student reflecting badly on the organization

- Three quarters are looking for red flags such as signs of bad judgment, provocative or inappropriate photographs or remarks, illegal activities (drug and alcohol use), insensitive or discriminatory remarks or a negative attitude

- Google student names for inappropriate material

- Review social media web sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube

- Use a professional email address like firstname.lastname@gmail.com

Workshop Ideas

- **How to search for scholarships online and offline**
- **Advice on applying for scholarships**
- **Help them create an accomplishments resume**
- **Writing workshops to help students write better essays and applications (e.g., writing the personal statement)**
- **Practice interviewing skills**
- **Workshops on specific scholarship programs**
- **How to keep a scholarship once won**
- **Importance of writing thank you letters**
- **Understanding the taxability of scholarships**

Advise Students on Their Essays

- **Do not write the essay for the student**
  - Proofreading for spelling, grammar, structure, flow and word limit restrictions is ok, rewriting the essay is not
- **Did the essay follow the instructions and answer the application question(s)?**
- **Has the essay been tailored to sponsor's goals?**
- **What does the essay tell the reader about the student and the student's impact on others? Does it reflect the student's personality?**
- **Is the essay interesting or boring? Does it tell a story with specific examples and anecdotes? Does it stand out from the crowd?**
  - Does the first paragraph use a hook to capture the reader's attention?

Secret to Writing Better Essays

- **If you have trouble writing essays, answer the question out loud while recording the answer and transcribe the recording later**
- **Create an outline from the transcription to add structure to the essay and organize your thoughts**
- **Most people speak at a rate of 200 words per minute and write or type at a rate of 30 to 60 words per minute, so the act of writing interferes with the flow of thought.**
- **Recording the answer will also yield a more fluid and passionate essay**
- **A similar trick can help with proofreading essays**
  - Read the essay out loud and note where you stumble
  - Any disfluencies are a sign of a problem with the essay

Help Students Ace Interviews

- **Conduct mock interviews to help them practice**
  - Practice, practice, practice, practice, practice
- **Videotape the mock interview and review the recording with the student afterward, giving specific tips for improvement**
- **Teach students proper business attire and etiquette**
- **It should go without saying, but students need to practice proper hygiene in face-to-face interviews**
- **Remind students after the interview to send a thank you note to the interviewer**

Tips for Telephone and Webcam Interviews

- **Conduct the interview in a quiet room**
- **Use a corded phone, nor a cordless or cell phone, and do not use a speakerphone**
- **Clean the lens on the webcam**
- **Make sure there is nothing embarrassing within view of the webcam**
- **Look at the webcam when you speak, not the video of the interviewer**
  - Place the webcam in the center of the video of the interviewer to ensure that you look at the camera
  - Continually shifting your eyes to look at the video can make you look distracted
  - Try to maintain eye contact with the interviewer by looking at the camera

Tips on Writing Recommendations

- If you can't write an enthusiastic letter, suggest that the student seek a letter from someone else
- Review the selection criteria before writing the letter and tailor the letter to the award program
- Highlight specific examples, accomplishments and anecdotes to make candidate interesting
- Discuss what makes the candidate memorable, impressive, unusual, outstanding, superior
- Provide information and insights that are not available elsewhere
- Write at least a full page, possibly longer

Help Students Avoid Pitfalls

- **Beware of scholarship scams**
  - If you have to pay money to get money, it's probably a scam
  - Never invest more than a postage stamp to get information about scholarships or to apply for a scholarship
  - Nobody can guarantee that you'll win a scholarship
  - Use of the unclaimed aid myth is another sign of a scam
- **Schools should be cautious about linking to unknown scholarships without verifying them first**
  - New type of scholarship scam tries to get links from .edu web sites (high SEO value) and later retasks the web site for advertising purposes
  - Some scholarship scams initially don't charge a fee but add the fee later
  - Solution: Beware of "shallow" content and revisit links periodically

Most Common Application Mistakes

- **Missing deadlines**
- **Failing to proofread the application**
- **Failing to follow directions (essay length, number of recommendations)**
- **Omitting required information**
- **Applying for an award when you don't qualify**
- **Failing to apply for an award for which you are eligible**
- **Failing to tailor the application to the sponsor**
- **Writing a boring essay**
- **Writing an essay that may offend the reviewer**
- **Including exaggerations or lies on your application**

Don't Overlook Need-Based Aid

- Students and parents have a tendency to overestimate eligibility for merit-based aid and underestimate eligibility for need-based aid
- Most students will depend on a combination of merit-based and need-based aid
- Encourage all students to file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) at fafsa.ed.gov every year, even if they didn't qualify for anything other than loans last year
- Some scholarship providers require all applicants to file the FAFSA to ensure that they qualify for all the need-based aid for which they are eligible, especially grants
- Some scholarships depend on a combination of merit and need

Useful Resources

- **Quick Reference Guide on Winning a Scholarship**
  www.finaid.org/scholarships/WinningaScholarship.pdf

- **PowerPoint Presentation for Secrets to Winning a Scholarship**
  www.finaid.org/questions/20110419scholarshipsecrets.ppt

- **PowerPoint Presentation on Top Ten Myths about Scholarships**
  www.finaid.org/scholarships/20110923scholarshipmyths.ppt

- **Fastweb article about Top Ten Myths about Scholarships**
  www.fastweb.com/financial-aid/articles/3291-top-ten-myths-about-scholarships