Designing the Initial Selection Process

Scholarship selection processes can be some of the most intimidating yet rewarding functions of scholarship providers. These processes are the means by which an organization will attempt to fulfill its mission in the scholarship process by selecting the most appropriate recipients of scholarship aid. The selection process depends on human judgment. Since a common goal is to make that selection process as fair and objective as possible, those in charge of administering scholarship programs need continued opportunities for learning and development.

Selection processes range from paper-based applications to online application reviews, and can include interviews, resumes, recommendations, essays, grade point averages, standardized test scores, and auditions. The selection process must be aligned with each agency's mission and objectives; this means there is no one solution for various scholarship agencies.

Selection is of primary importance to the scholarship process as it is the means by which the organization attempts to find the appropriate "fit" of scholarship recipient and organization. Each organization's mission should drive the selection process, and the evaluation should be crafted to fulfill the intent of each scholarship opportunity.

There are a number of questions providers should ask internally when preparing for the selection process of a scholarship award:

- Who is the target of this scholarship opportunity, and what should the committee consider in the process that will help select the appropriate recipients?
- What are the qualifications for this scholarship opportunity?
- When is the deadline to apply for the scholarship (if any) and what is the time frame for review and awarding? Students and families may be anxious during the process, and it is good practice to give them a general timeline of the process.
- Will there be any exceptions to the deadline for the students or to third parties (such as counselors, teachers, or professors) who are submitting recommendations on behalf of students?
- How will the application be submitted? Is it an online process or paper based? The method of application will greatly affect the business practices of the selection process.
- Will a staff member or volunteer review the applications, initially, for completeness or to confirm eligibility, before forwarding to the selection committee?
- Who will evaluate the applications? If using volunteers, how will they be educated on the process and prepared to make appropriate selections? How many applications will each evaluator be reading? What is a bearable threshold for a volunteer?
- How many evaluators will review each application? In a fair and objective process, it is essential to have multiple evaluators reviewing each application to minimize bias. This also reduces the pressure on any one evaluator. Being the sole decision-maker as to who gets a

scholarship would be burdensome, undermining the evaluator's self-confidence and possibly leading to score inflation.

The method by which to collect this information – paper or online – should be determined and tested prior to soliciting applications. While the ubiquity of computers in homes, schools, libraries, and college campuses means that most students have access to computers somewhere in their lives, providers who are trying to reach disadvantaged populations must weight their reliance on technology (online applications, uploads, and email attachments) with the needs of the candidate pool.

The number of evaluators required for a thorough process varies greatly by program, depending on the scope of the program and number of applicants. Many programs have at least three evaluators read each application and take an average of the three scores. Some programs have four, five, or more evaluators read each application. If the selection committee has at least five scores for each application, they can drop the highest and lowest scores and average the centermost scores, to help eliminate bias and lessen the impact of outlying scores.

- Will the selection process include interviews? Interview committees must be thoroughly prepared and highly coordinated. Many scholarship programs use the "in person" interview, and this endeavor is often the final event in their selection process.

There are many potential positive and negative aspects to interviewing applicants:

Positive: Students who might not express themselves well on a written application have a chance to use their verbal skills to make their case. Providers can verify the accuracy of the written answers by asking questions to students. If the provider intends for the scholars to become representatives of the sponsoring organization, the interview gives the provider an opportunity to gauge student articulateness and presentation skills.

Negative: It can be time-consuming to plan, schedule, and host the interviews. Students may unknowingly influence the committee with their charm or lack thereof. People are influenced by appearances, which may manifest a bias in the process.

As we consider each of these points above, it becomes apparent that thorough development and preparation are imperative to make the selection process as fair and objective as possible. Developing and understanding the application evaluation process is important not only for program personnel, but also for the selection committee.

Many programs give weight to such factors as academic achievement, community service, leadership potential, financial need, situational hardship, and select demographic categories and locations. While the selection process should be set up to solicit the most appropriate responses from applicants, it is important that the evaluation committee be trained to read the applications in context.

Applicants will have different responses to the application, depending on the context in which each one lives. Sound selection processes should give the evaluator enough material to contextualize the individual applicant. This contextualization should help the evaluator understand where the applicant comes from and what opportunities have been available to them, including their background in education, family situation and challenges/opportunities in their development and success. This contextualization should also include their future plans, educational program possibilities, and challenges they anticipate in their educational journey.

A thorough and robust selection process is pertinent to the success of a scholarship program. Strong selection processes will enable an organization to fulfill its mission and better serve its constituents.

Source: Larry Sparkman, Director, Lucky Day Foundation Citizens Scholars Program, University of Southern Mississippi