

Harvard Scholarships: No Such Thing

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By no such thing as Harvard Scholarships, I mean no such thing as Harvard Merit Scholarships. So if you're thinking you'll be able to pay for Harvard based on your kid's academic qualifications (after all, they were good enough to get into Harvard) you need to think again. The reward for your student's amazing accomplishment is the acceptance letter itself. Any scholarships Harvard hands out will be based on financial need, not academics.



Scholarships can be based on need or merit

The problem is that the term "scholarship" can refer to either need-based or [merit-based](#) awards. And let's face it, it's just easier to say, "Mary got a full-ride scholarship to Harvard" rather than "Harvard met Mary's full need with need-based grants and work-study." The fact is that Harvard is incredibly generous with its need-based aid so quite a few students can claim "Harvard Scholarships." But they have nothing to do with merit.

Why am I even talking about Harvard scholarships? Because I want people to understand where to find merit scholarships and explaining why it isn't Harvard gets people's attention. Ultimately, Harvard isn't the only college that doesn't offer merit scholarships. You can see the list below. But let's keep our focus on Harvard for a moment.

The Harvard Scholarships example

There are plenty of families with kids applying to Harvard, over 57,000 in the Fall of 2021. Plenty applied understanding the nature of financial aid at Harvard; in fact, quite a few didn't care because they're willing to pay full price. But the parents of some percentage of students who applied, thought that if they were good enough to get into Harvard, their academic performance would be rewarded financially with scholarships as well. Having heard something about need-based aid, they were thinking merit scholarships since that's the term floating around in the college admissions process.

Chances are that their kids all worked very hard and "deserved" to be rewarded for their hard work. But who does the rewarding? Who is to provide the merit scholarships? And why doesn't Harvard provide merit scholarships?

The purpose of merit scholarships

Without going into the history of merit scholarships, the reason they exist to the extent they do today is for colleges to provide incentives for students to attend their institutions. If you aren't Harvard, how do you get kids with great academic credentials to attend your school? You offer them a scholarship to reward those great academic credentials.

From the school's perspective, merit scholarships are an incentive. They are marketing. They actually call it "tuition discounting." Students with the right credentials are receiving a coupon to attend their school.

Do you now understand why there is no such thing as Harvard scholarships? They don't need to market their school. They already have more applicants with amazing qualifications than they can admit. Harvard has absolutely no need to provide incentives to attract students to apply.

And they are quite clear about it on their website. Harvard's [Frequently Asked Questions](#):

Are there any merit-based financial aid awards at Harvard?

No, we admit students based on their strengths and talents, but all Harvard-administered aid is based only on financial need, and we treat all admitted students equally in terms of their eligibility for that aid.

So no merit scholarships. But it's no wonder people talk about Harvard Scholarships since the FAQ also includes:

How do you determine eligibility for Harvard Scholarships?

We determine your financial aid award based solely on your family’s demonstrated financial need. Our program is designed to help families across the economic spectrum, from low to upper-middle incomes. Aid is completely need-based and considers many factors, such as your family’s income, assets, size, and unusual expenses. There are no merit-based awards, and we have no preferential packaging policies that give some students more attractive awards than others.

The question asks about scholarships and while the answer talks about “awards” rather than “scholarships” it’s easy to see how people use the term Harvard scholarships even when it’s all based on need.

The fact is that if you get into Harvard, you better be able to afford your [Expected Family Contribution \(EFC\)](#) as calculated by the Institutional Methodology because their won’t be any help from merit scholarships.

If you’re looking for colleges that will reward academic accomplishments with generous merit aid, then you need to find schools that don’t have their pick of the best students available. It means that you’ll need to avoid schools like Harvard. The following is a list of 55 schools that provide little to no merit aid. Many claim to meet full-need but not all.

Colleges that don’t Offer Merit Scholarships

Name	Type	State	Full-time Undergrads	% Admitted	Avg % of Need met for Freshman	% Institutional Aid Need-based
Amherst College	Private	MA	1,971	9	100	100
Babson College	Private	MA	2,551	25		
Barnard College	Private	NY	2,959	11	100	100
Bates College	Private	ME	1,821	17	100	100
Boston College	Private	MA	9,749	19		
Boston University	Private	MA	17,460	19	95	94
Bowdoin College	Private	ME	1,948	9	100	100
Brown University	Private	RI	7,082	6	100	100
Bucknell University	Private	PA	3,715	35	92	90
California Institute of Technology	Private	CA	987	4	100	100
Carleton College	Private	MN	2,032	18	100	99
Claremont McKenna College	Private	CA	1,411	11	100	96
Colby College	Private	ME	2,262	9		
Colgate University	Private	NY	3,142	17	100	98
Colorado College	Private	CO	2,190	14	100	96
Columbia University	Private	NY	8,161	4		
Cornell University	Private	NY	15,450	9	100	100
Dartmouth College	Private	NH	4,555	6	100	100
Davidson College	Private	NC	1,973	18	100	93
Duke University	Private	NC	6,838	6	100	91
Emory University	Private	GA	7,028	13	100	92
Franklin and Marshall College	Private	PA	2,127	38	100	99
Hamilton College	Private	NY	2,049	14	100	100
Harvard University	Private	MA	7,483	4	100	100
Haverford College	Private	PA	1,419	18	100	100
Johns Hopkins University	Private	MD	5,727	8		

Name	Type	State	Full-time Undergrads	% Admitted	Avg % of Need met for Freshman	% Institutional Aid Need-based
Lehigh University	Private	PA	5,375	46	97	95
Middlebury College	Private	VT	2,835	13	100	100
New York University	Private	NY	27,642	13	67	96
Northwestern University	Private	IL	8,438	7	100	99
Pitzer College	Private	CA	1,132	18	100	99
Pomona College	Private	CA	1,756	7	100	100
Princeton University	Private	NJ	5,240	4	100	100
Reed College	Private	OR	1,515	44	100	100
Rice University	Private	TX	4,156	9	100	94
Skidmore College	Private	NY	2,655	31	100	99
Smith College	Private	MA	2,554	30	100	94
Stanford University	Private	CA	7,645	4	100	98
Swarthmore College	Private	PA	1,649	8	100	96
Tufts University	Private	MA	6,509	11	100	100
University of Chicago	Private	IL	7,601	6		
University of Notre Dame	Private	IN	8,956	15	100	95
University of Pennsylvania	Private	PA	10,106	6	100	100
University of Virginia	Public	VA	16,427	21	100	92
Vanderbilt University	Private	TN	7,042	7	100	90
Vassar College	Private	NY	2,498	20	100	100
Villanova University	Private	PA	6,812	25	82	90
Wake Forest University	Private	NC	5,391	25	97	91
Washington University in St Louis	Private	MO	7,348	13	100	95
Wellesley College	Private	MA	2,381	16	100	100
Wesleyan University	Private	CT	3,238	19	100	99
Wiley College	Private	TX	584		8	93
Williams College	Private	MA	2,135	9	100	100
Yale University	Private	CT	6,532	5	100	100

If the school posted its [Common Data Set \(CDS\)](#) information, I used the information from the financial aid section to calculate the number of non-need students receiving merit aid. If the CDS information isn't available, I used the [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System \(IPEDS\)](#) information to identify schools providing limited merit aid. Therefore, some of the schools do offer merit scholarships, but remember I said, "little to no merit aid." Let's take Duke as an example.

Duke Scholarships

[Duke's financial aid page](#) lists ten, that's right ten, different merit scholarship programs, nine of which students are automatically considered for. Definitely a sign of "Duke Scholarships," right? Yes, but they should be considered rare. If you want to understand just how many merit scholarships we're talking about, you need to visit [Duke's Common Data Set](#).

According to Duke's 2021-22 Common Data Set, it awarded over \$14 million in non-need-based aid. Sounds like a lot, right? It probably is to the 151 undergraduates out of 6,789 who received them. That's just over 2% of undergraduates without need who received "Duke Scholarships" according to the Common Data Set.

Northwestern Scholarships

How about another, one that doesn't post its Common Data Set information. If you're wondering why not, maybe the financial aid information is a reason why.

A quick web search takes you to the [Northwestern University Scholarship](#) page. The page lists a variety of Northwestern scholarships, most that have a significant financial need component. And even though Northwestern isn't posting their common data set information, you can get most of it from CollegeData.com. Under the "Financials" section, you'll find that Northwestern reported 19 freshmen without need receiving an average award of \$4,299. That's out of 2,086 freshmen enrolled so we're talking less than 2% of freshman without need receiving institutional merit awards.

Common Data Set

The only information that states the number of students without need receiving merit aid is the Common Data Set (CDS). It's the survey used by US News Best College Rankings and other publishers to collect information not available from the Federal Government's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). However, the reliability of the data is questionable and cannot be easily searched through the select number of college search websites that publish it. Approximately half of all schools post their CDS information online allowing students and families to look up the information themselves. However, it does make it difficult to compare schools which is probably the point.

Common Data Set Limitations

The Common Data Set has some obvious limitations in terms of identifying schools offering merit scholarships. One issue is that things are relative. When a school charges over \$80,000 a year, a lot more high-income students are going to qualify as having financial need. Therefore, students who receive a merit-award which the school uses to address need, will not show up as a non-need student receiving merit aid. Theoretically.

The fact is that over the years I have found a dozen or so schools each year where the numbers simply don't add up: the numbers of non-need students receiving merit scholarships exceed the calculated total number of non-need students. I'm sure there are plenty of others that I missed because if the number of non-need students receiving merit scholarships does not exceed the calculated total number of non-need students, I don't have any math warning signs that something is not right.

For those who rely on the CDS information that states the amount of institutional aid is need-based or non-need based, you might want to check out some schools that claim their institutional aid is 100% need-based. In its 2020-21 [CDS](#), the University of Kentucky listed all of its institutional aid as being used to meet need. Yet, its website lists non-need merit scholarships. Furthermore, later in the financial aid section of the CDS, it shows 1,377 freshmen without need were awarded non-need institutional scholarships. Then there's the fact apparently none of the external sources of aid were listed as all being only need-based as well.

The University of Kentucky isn't the only school with this problem. The University of Tennessee-Knoxville has the same issue. And then there are cases like The University of the Incarnate Word which shows a total amount of \$5,000 under non-need based institutional aid but 58 freshmen without need receiving an average of \$13,410 in institutional non-need aid.

So who do you blame? The schools for the sloppy reporting of something they don't have to post anyway and probably would rather not have the public poking around in to begin with? The publishers who are collecting the data without some very basic quality control mechanisms in place and yet are making millions of dollars off of it? Or the public who continues to buy the information in the form of rankings every year?

Looking for Merit Aid/Scholarships

Ultimately, I consider the matter irrelevant. You don't need the Common Data Set information to identify which schools are offering meaningful merit aid and which don't. I won't go into the specifics here but you can see the basic strategy [DIYCollegeRankings.com](#)

at [4 Easy Steps to Find Colleges with Merit Scholarships](#). The point of this post was to let people know that the hardest schools to get into do not reward the academic achievements with merit aid. Students can generally expect amazing need-based aid as defined by the school.

Colleges that offer generous merit aid or academic scholarships, do so because they aren't as well known and are trying to attract students to their campus. They are by definition, not as competitive as the elite schools. Basically, the lower the acceptance rate, the lower the chances for merit aid.