

National Merit Award Program

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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®)—a test which serves as an initial screen of approximately 1.4 million entrants each year—and by meeting published program entry/participation requirements.

Program Recognition

Of the 1.4 million entrants, some 50,000 with the highest PSAT/NMSQT® Selection Index scores (critical reading + mathematics + writing skills scores) qualify for recognition in the National Merit® Scholarship Program. In April following the fall test administration, high-scoring participants from every state are invited to name two colleges or universities to which they would like to be referred by NMSC. 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 or 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 below the level required for participants to be named Semifinalists in their respective states. Although Commended Students do not continue in the competition for Merit Scholarship® awards, 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 able 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 Merit Scholarship® award, Semifinalists must advance to Finalist standing in the competition by meeting high academic standards and all other requirements explained in the materials provided to each Semifinalist.

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.

Scholarship Winners

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, school official's written recommendation, information about the student's activities and leadership, and the Finalist's own essay.