SCHOLARSHIP TIMELINE – GRADUATING SENIORS

The Heart of Illinois Community Foundation (HICF) online scholarship application portal for **Scholarships for Graduating High School Seniors for Fall Semester 2027** opens **January 1, 2027**. The portal will remain open to receive applications for Fall Semester 2027 awards until March 1, 2027 (11:59 PM). Here are your step-by-step details on how to apply for 2027 Scholarships.

BEFORE YOU APPLY – *Gather Your Materials*

FINANCES – *Get Started in October*

Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which usually opens October 1st. Most institutions require you to complete the FAFSA, as it also impacts the type of scholarships and aid you may be offered or receive from them. If you plan to apply for student aid, please complete the FAFSA at https://studentaid.gov *(and only do it from this official government site – other spam sites do exist, so be careful to go to the correct one, and be aware you should never be charged to complete the FAFSA)*. You will want to gather your financial and tax information and have everything together and accessible so you are ready to complete it when you log in.

Visit studentaid.gov/articles/filling-out-fafsa/ to read about how to prepare and complete the FAFSA or visit https://isac.org for additional help.

You will want to complete the FAFSA in a timely manner, as many colleges and universities will have earlier deadlines for any institutional aid and scholarships they offer, prior to completing our process (priority deadlines are often November 1). Pell Grant and other State of Illinois Grants (like the MAP Grant) are often first come, first served based on need and run out quickly. Verify with the Admissions and Financial Aid offices of the campus of your choice to be *fully aware* of their deadlines.

NOTE: You will need the FAFSA Submission Summary in PDF form to upload to the financial information section of our application. Once your FAFSA is processed, you (the student) can log into your FAFSA, select the correct year, then click on *View or Print your FAFSA Submission Summary*. The next screen gives the option to print it or view the FAFSA as a pdf. At this point, you may save the pdf to have it ready to upload it onto the online scholarship application when you complete it. The FAFSA Submission Summary document is approximately 5 to 8 pages or more in length. The Student Aid Index (SAI) number, which you will need for your scholarship application, is located within the first page or two of your FAFSA.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION – *Get started in November*

Before you begin your application, you will want to secure your letters of recommendation – you will need a minimum of **two** letters that meet the following criteria to apply:

- One letter of recommendation from a current teacher/instructor at your high school.
- One letter of recommendation from a community member (this may be your pastor, employer, high school counselor, mentor, club/organization advisor, etc.) *Letters from parents and relatives are not accepted.*

PLEASE NOTE: There are some scholarships that do require an additional letter of recommendation with outlined criteria for that letter. Please pay close attention to the criteria for the scholarship which you may be applying for. *Please refer to the Scholarship Application Tips guide for more information.*

Don't delay your application process - be sure to ***ask early*** to allow your references to complete the letters of recommendation in a ***timely*** manner.

When asking someone to write a letter or serve as a reference for you, make sure you provide them with information about why you need a letter of recommendation, what scholarship(s) you may be applying for, and also characteristics and experiences you have that would be good for them to highlight in the letter (especially related to the scholarships that interest you). It is most helpful if these are submitted on

letterhead (where available) and also signed by the person who wrote it. Be sure it also contains the person's current contact information. You will need to upload these letters in a DOC or PDF form into the application where requested. (Screenshots/Photos are not acceptable.)

INVOLVEMENT & SERVICE – *Complete updates in November/December*

On the scholarship application, you will provide information about your involvement in community service, employment experiences (if applicable), extracurricular activities, honors and awards, athletics, leadership positions, special skills or training, etc. This will be entered in LIST format (name of organization or experience, position or serve type, years or amount of time involved, etc.). Hopefully, you have been keeping track throughout your high school experience. Now is the time to update your list of your involvements, noting when you were involved (period of time), how many hours you spent per week or served overall, if you held a leadership position (when and how long), and number of hours of community service you have accumulated (especially if it's more than the required amount of hours required for graduation). Take stock of any other special experiences or skills you have, and note any honors or awards you have received during high school.

PREPARE YOUR DOCUMENTS

Before you begin your application, we recommend you also gather your other pieces of needed documentation – Proof of Residency (if requested) and Academic Information.

Residency Requirements
The majority of scholarships at the graduating high school senior level require you to be a graduate of one of the high schools in our current service area (currently Macon, Moultrie, or Piatt County in Illinois). We are mainly able to verify that via your high school transcript. However, a scholarship opportunity may require you to additionally show Proof of County Residency for the past 12 (consecutive) months as part of the application. Your parents may need to provide this information if it's requested. Accepted documentation includes: Housing receipts or Utility bill (from 12 months ago), Voter's Registration Card, etc.

Academic Information
You will need to gather the following information to complete the Academic Information section of the application:

- High School transcript (showing seven semesters, from Freshman year through first semester Senior year – you can request this from your school counselor)
- SAT or ACT or both scores and related documentation (if applicable - this is optional for most opportunities)
- Cumulative unweighted GPA *(Most scholarships have minimum GPA requirements)*
- Name of 2-yr or 4-yr College/University, Trade School, or Apprenticeship program you will attend (accredited institution within the United States).
- Your major/field of study or Trade School/Apprenticeship program you plan to pursue.
- Approximate cost of the Institution you plan to attend.
- Estimated graduation/completion date.

DRAFT YOUR ESSAY RESPONSE

The scholarship application requires an essay to be written as a standard part of the application. This Personal Essay (written in essay format) should be written by the applicant and address and answer the following questions (at least one paragraph addressing each question within the overall essay), including answers specific to you, with detail:

- What personal characteristics or experiences qualify you to receive a scholarship? *(What do you think sets you apart from other applicants?)*
- Share 2-3 of your learning/educational goals *(How do you want to grow as a learner?)* Explain how you hope to achieve them by continuing your education (via college/university or trade program).
- Share two of your career goals and/or long-term life goals. What steps will you take to achieve them?

Some specific scholarship applications may require an *additional* essay to be written in response to questions related to the scholarship. This is often included in the printed criteria for the individual scholarship, and can also be found within the application as you complete it. *Please refer to the Scholarship Application Tips guide for information and a list of those that require additional items.*

READY TO APPLY – *Completing Your Scholarship Application Online*

STEP ONE: ACCESS THE SCHOLARSHIP PORTAL (JANUARY 1)

Ready to get started? First, go to https://www.heartofillinois.org/scholarship and click the link for the *HICF Scholarship Application Portal* or access it directly at https://bit.ly/HICFScholarship (we highly recommend bookmarking this page for easier access going forward). If you are a first-time applicant, on the login page click the *Create New Account* button and complete the required fields to create your account and login/password. If you have applied before, please login to the portal using your account information (Email + Password) – if you don't remember your password, click the *Forgot Your Password?* Link to reset it.

Scan to Connect
GET STARTED TODAY

STEP TWO: BEGIN YOUR APPLICATION

Once you are logged in, you will be able to start the process of applying for scholarships. On the Apply page of your Applicant Dashboard, you will want to select the Student Scholarship process that is available to you. Please be sure to fully complete all required sections and required fields, also uploading DOC/PDF files for requested documentation (no screenshots or image files please). There is one main Universal Application to complete – as you respond to the questions in the application, the system will determine which scholarship opportunities are a match to you. Depending on which scholarships match to you, additional sections may become available to you as related to those opportunities. Some may require an additional essay, letter, or other item.

- **Complete the Personal Information section** – Responses to these questions help determine which scholarships match to you and what awards will become available to you.
- **Complete the Academic Information & Extracurricular Activities/Service section of the application** (Enter the required academic information and upload your academic documentation in this section.)
- **Complete the Financial Information section of the application.** (You will upload your FAFSA Submission Summary into the application and enter your Student Aid Index (SAI) number here – if not utilizing FAFSA, please upload your Tax Return here with social security numbers marked out for your protection.)
- **Complete the Personal Essay response.** Upload or include your personal essay response into the application.
- **Upload Letters of Recommendation.** Upload your two required letters of recommendation where indicated.
- **Complete the Photo Release Waiver** (accept or deny).
- **Complete Any Additional Sections.** Based on your earlier responses and which scholarships you match to, you may have additional essays, statements, and/or letters of recommendation or verification

STEP THREE: SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION

After reviewing the requested items on your application for completion and accuracy, complete the Electronic Signature (including your full name), select the date you are actually submitting your application, and click SUBMIT APPLICATION. Once you do so, the next page you see will display the scholarship opportunities you may be eligible for as well as a list of those that require additional items. Once you have reviewed the list, click CONTINUE in the lower right corner of the page. It will then take you through each opportunity you are eligible for and allow you to upload any additionally needed items before submitting for that opportunity, or allow you to "Abandon Request" if you choose to not apply for an opportunity you have matched to. You can also click "Save Application" at this time if you're not ready to complete the section being displayed for you. To view all of your open opportunities, click the "Home" icon in the upper left

corner of the top toolbar to view your Applicant Dashboard. Any sections you have not yet submitted will appear in the "Assigned to You" column on the left side of your Applicant Dashboard. You can continue them at any time by clicking "Start" or "Continue" within the listed opportunity.

The Scholarship Application deadline (for Fall Semester 2027 awards) is **March 1, 2027 by 11:59 PM**. You must submit completed applications by that deadline to be considered. *Late applications will NOT be accepted.*

Prior to the deadline, once we have received your submitted application(s), it will be briefly reviewed. (Applications received in the week of the portal closing will likely not have the opportunity to be reviewed prior to portal close – please plan accordingly.) We will contact you if there are concerns (incorrect file type or documentation). Additionally, if you have questions regarding your application during the process, please contact Andrea Gerhard, HICF Director of Scholarships & Grants at agerhard@heartofillinois.org or by calling 217-429-3000.

NEXT STEPS – *What to expect after submitting your application*

WHILE YOU WAIT

After the application deadline (March 1 at 11:59 PM), our scholarship committees and reviewers get to work – they evaluate and review all applications received by the deadline, reading and scoring the applications based on the criteria during the review process. **The committee members will complete reviews of each application during the month of March.**

NOTIFICATION PROCESS

Once all applications have been reviewed, awards will be determined for those receiving a scholarship. Depending on the scholarship, often High School Guidance Counselors and recipient parents may be notified first. Some scholarship recipients may not be known until the school's award ceremony. Once aware, Scholarship recipients will additionally be notified of their total award via letter and email along with additional instruction about award acceptance in their award packet.

AWARD ACCEPTANCE FOR SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

THIS IS REQUIRED: Those who receive a scholarship award will need to complete the assigned *Award Acceptance and Follow-Up Forms* in the scholarship portal by the specified due date for the particular process (due dates will be set following award decisions). For this you will need your Proof of Enrollment and/or fall course schedule, Student ID number, contact information for the Financial Aid department of your institution/program, and a formal Thank You letter written to the donor or other specified individual/organization.

SCHOLARSHIP AWARD DISTRIBUTION

Once the assigned *Award Acceptance and Follow-Up Form* has been fully completed by the recipient by the specified due date and approved by HICF, the scholarship award check will be processed (on the 15th/1stof the month, July 15th or after) and HICF will mail it directly to the specified college/university/program (July/August if *Award Acceptance and Follow-Up Form* is complete and approved by the specified due date). *Communication is essential in this process - any question related to your forms, delays you're experiencing, or changes to your school or status are critical to communicate in a timely manner to the Director of Scholarships and Grants.*

ADDITIONAL NOTES

We encourage you to do your research also - Visit your Institution's website (University or College) or connect with their Foundation or Student Services/Accounts/Financial Aid office to learn about their available scholarships. Take time to talk with your current employer or a parent's employer to see if they offer scholarships or tuition reimbursement programs. Also talk with your guidance counselor and complete searches for other available scholarship opportunities.

QUESTIONS? Contact the Heart of Illinois Community Foundation at 217.429.3000.

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Director of Scholarships & Grants
217.429.3000
agerhard@heartofillinois.org
LEARN MORE AT *HEARTOFILLINOIS.ORG/SCHOLARSHIP*

SCHOLARSHIP PORTAL OPEN
JANUARY 1, 2027 TO MARCH 1, 2027