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# BY MERIT ALONE

The brightest and the best in our schools  
are sought by every university in the country.

Years of hard work and persistence  
have paid off with opportunities  
for some very attractive scholarships

By STEPHEN M. SUTHERLAND

If one were to ask administrators at universities and colleges throughout the country, "What is the most prestigious scholarship which a freshman may receive upon entering your institution?", most assuredly, the response would be, "A National Merit Scholarship." This is also the award that the public has come to associate with the ultimate achievement for high school graduates. Although the National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC) issues a specific warning against the practice, some communities measure the success of their high school programs and the comparative quality of the graduating classes in large part by the number of National Merit finalists and semi-finalists they produce.

A particular institution may offer an award which carries more prestige locally, and there certainly are scholarships which carry greater stipends, but nationwide, the designation "National Merit Scholar" is the most prestigious. Even the name "merit scholarship," which would seem to be a generic term, is a federally registered service mark of the NMSC, as the University of Oklahoma Foundation found to its amazement several years ago when selecting a name for the R. Boyd Gunning (merit) Scholarships.

Each year the *Chronicles of Higher Education* publishes, and many other newspapers pick up, a list of the institutions that enroll the greatest number of Merit Scholars in their freshmen classes. In case you're wondering, Harvard and Radcliffe Colleges always seem to end up as number one on the list. In 1984, 323 National Merit Scholars chose to spend their freshmen years at Harvard and Radcliffe.

Two years ago, when the *Chronicles'* list came out, several calls were received at the University of Oklahoma asking why we were not listed in the top 40 Merit Scholarship institutions in the United States. One reason for the University's failure to make the list is that up until that time we had not participated in one of the three programs administered by the NMSC, a category known as the "College-sponsored four-year Merit Scholarship program." *Continued*



*Steve Sutherland, center, meets in his office with Bartlesville elementary education major Amy Natho and Oklahoma City engineering major Granger Meador. Both are National Merit finalists, R. Boyd Gunning and University Scholars. Granger is one of five University freshmen recipients of direct grants from the NMSC, while Amy received one of three college-sponsored four-year scholarships.*

The first two NMSC programs are financed by agencies outside the colleges and universities. The first, the National Merit Scholarship, is a one-time \$2,000 award which comes from grants from corporations and businesses as well as undesignated Merit Program funds. These awards are applied to educational expenses at the institution of the recipient's choice. The second program, the Corporate-sponsored, four-year Merit Scholarships, are funded in amounts from \$250 to \$4,000 per year by business and industrial firms and corporate foundations. The College-sponsored four-year Merit Scholarships, on the other hand, are provided by the indi-

vidual institution in amounts ranging from \$250 to \$2,000 per year for four years to National Merit finalists who agree to attend that institution.

The University of Oklahoma has been the choice of scholars in the first two categories throughout the history of the National Merit program. Only since 1983, however, has the University offered College-sponsored scholarships to National Merit finalists, and only this coming fall will such awards be offered in significant numbers. While three scholarships of \$500 a year each for four years were given in 1983 and 1984, OU plans to award more than 20 College-sponsored National Merit Scholarships in 1985.

One of the questions which well might be raised in regard to an institution's participation in the NMSC or any other scholarship program based on merit is, "Do these students have financial need?" The answer is, "No. Need is not a criterion for selection." This being the case, the issue ought to be faced up front.

Why should students, who in the case of National Merit semifinalists are in the top one-half of one percent of all graduating high school seniors in the state, receive financial awards on merit alone? Perhaps John Houseman, that very professorial, earnest spokesman for the investment firm of Smith Barney, could state it most eloquently if he would paraphrase his television commercial. "Why?" he would ask in his sonorous voice. "Because they've earned it."

For many years, high school principals, teachers, counselors, superintendents, and yes, even parents have encouraged secondary students to do their very best. The basic underlying, perhaps inferred, suggestion has been that hard work and meritorious performance would be rewarded. I think they should be.

Higher education has seen a plethora of programs designed to aid the needy, the economically and socially disadvantaged. I have no quarrel with these programs at all. By the same token, one should not discriminate against academic excellence — the very value we espouse — just because a student's parents are not poverty stricken. We think nothing of offering scholarships to the athletically gifted regardless of need, and surely the same should apply to the intellectually gifted.

For all the publicity which surrounds the awarding of the National Merit Scholarships, most people have only the vaguest notion of what a high school student in any given community must do to qualify for this distinction. The process is somewhat complicated from an administrative standpoint, but a brief explanation does give some idea of Oklahoma's place in this national competition.

In October of their junior years, approximately one million students at more than 18,700 high schools all over

the United States take a test called the PSAT/NMSQT (Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test). In 1984, for instance, 7,757 students from 291 Oklahoma high schools participated. Based on the results of this test, which is comprised of two parts, the verbal and the mathematical, the National Merit Scholarship Corporation establishes a "selection index" for each state.

The selection index formula is the verbal score times two plus the mathematical score, i.e.  $SI = (V \times 2) + M$  — for example,  $(65 \times 2) + 70 = 200$ . The range of selection index scores is from 181 for the state of Mississippi to 203 for Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland and the District of Columbia. The 1984 selection index for an Oklahoman to be considered for the semifinal round was 191. Approximately 50,000 students in the country reach this level; about 15,000 semifinalists are selected and the remaining 35,000 receive a Letter of Commendation but do not continue in competition for the big money.

Of the 15,000 semifinalists in the nation in 1984, 194 were Oklahoma students representing 67 high schools.

Approximately 90 percent of the semifinalists become National Merit finalists and receive a Certificate of Merit. Only 40 percent of the finalists — about 5,000 — actually receive a scholarship administered by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation — approximately 1,800 National Merit awards of \$2,000 each, 1,500 corporate-sponsored awards and slightly over 2,000 college-sponsored awards.

This year's entering freshmen at the University of Oklahoma included five recipients of National Merit Scholarships, three with corporate-sponsored four-year scholarships and three with college-sponsored four-year grants, bringing the total now enrolled to 11.

The University of Oklahoma may be late getting into all aspects of the traditional National Merit program, but in the only other activity of the National Merit Scholarship Corporation, OU is getting a much earlier start. In September the University was chosen by the NMSC as the only

Oklahoma college or university, public or private, to join 36 other eligible institutions nationwide in the college-sponsored National Achievement Scholarship Program for Outstanding Negro Students. These students are known as Achievement Scholars.

Last year, the state of Oklahoma had 12 achievement program semifinalists, nine of whom advanced to the finalist category. Of those nine academically gifted black students, one went to Southern Methodist University, one to Cornell and seven enrolled at the University of Oklahoma. Each of the seven received a \$1,000 President's Award from the University. In 1985 the University will offer three college-sponsored scholarships of \$500 for each of four years to outstanding Oklahoma black students.

Proud as we at the University are of these distinguished National Merit and Achievement Scholars and as much as we look forward to adding significantly to their number next fall, we are equally proud of the members of four other groups of exceptional students who earned their scholarship status by merit alone. The memberships of these groups often overlap, and as a whole they represent the proverbial cream of the crop in their academic and leadership accomplishments. They are the R. Boyd Gunning Scholars, the Alumni Scholars, the University Scholars and the President's Leadership Class.


The largest and most prestigious of the University's merit awards, the R. Boyd Gunning Scholarships, bring \$2,000 per year for four years to 15 entering freshmen, who are selected on the basis of high school academic achievement, scores on national tests such as ACT and/or SAT, and leadership potential. These awards are funded privately by the University of Oklahoma Foundation, Inc., to honor its executive director emeritus.

The late Dr. Glenn C. Couch, dean of University College, founded the University Scholars in 1963 for academically gifted freshmen, who receive approximately the equivalent of tuition fee waivers and a modest book allowance for one year. Fifty students are selected as Alumni Scholars. Their scholarships, totaling \$3,000 over four

years, are provided by private contributions from alumni sponsors.

The President's Leadership Class is the oldest of the groups, established in 1961 by Vice President for University Affairs David A. Burr, and today numbers from 80 to 90 a year. They receive a scholarship similar to that of the University Scholars. Although nominated by their high school principals and selected by a university committee for their activity and leadership records, they also traditionally have excellent scores on the ACT (American College Test), OU's admissions and placement standard.

Especially gratifying to me is the fact that approximately 100 former University Scholars currently are contributing to the Alumni Scholars program. Likewise, PLC alumni are funding 25 upperclass PLC scholarships of \$500 each. Certainly such support says that those who have received assistance because of their meritorious high school performances are appreciative enough to want to repay the University by helping others.

As a University, our experience with our merit award recipients has been a rewarding one over the years. They have performed exceptionally well as freshmen. Not only have their grade point averages been markedly higher than the norm for first-year students, but they also have become deeply involved in the life of the University and remain so throughout their careers here. With nearly 25 years' worth of former scholars to measure, we see them emerging as leaders in nearly every area of endeavor on both the state and national levels. It is extremely satisfying to know that the University's confidence was not misplaced. From their first days on the campus to their graduation, they wore their laurels well — because they earned them. 

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Although being assistant dean of University College and adviser to OU's merit scholars occupies most of his time, Stephen M. Sutherland still teaches a course each semester in the department of geography where he is associate professor. Sutherland came to the University in 1958 from the University of Illinois.*