

New avenues for scholarships: changemakers and group activities

Scholarship exams are only one way to assess a student's potential: community activities and interactive sessions provide more holistic insights, writes Melinda Ham.

Nurturing children to change the world is part of Cornish College's vision. Located in Bangholme in South East Melbourne, this independent co-educational school awards 'changemaker scholarships' providing free tuition from Year 7 through to Year 12 to a student who wants to make a difference.

"Our thinking is that there are young people who really deserve an opportunity for the independent education that we offer," says Nicola Forrest, the school's principal. "We believe that if we bring young people with great ideas into our school community, we're actually going to build a collective mindset of change."

To receive this scholarship, named after the school's founding Chair of the College Board, Reverend Robert Johnson, a student must demonstrate their commitment to social justice and explain how they want to contribute to school and community opportunities, many of which could be student-led.

"Our philosophy is that we want our students to be well-rounded and well-grounded," says Forrest. "Those students who receive these scholarships are social justice warriors, already doing things in their school and community and we want to reward that."

Potential recipients apply online. The family's income is means tested and the child is asked questions about activities they participate in that demonstrate their creative, innovative and leadership talents and why they are a "changemaker".

For this scholarship, Cornish College looks beyond the scores. Academic achievement such as their NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) results or maths competition certificates are not part of the assessment, Forrest says. Students with the highest academic abilities are not only the best-suited.

Candidates are not required to do the reading, writing and mathematics scholarship exams. They need only sit the general reasoning test to demonstrate critical thinking and problem solving skills.

"We want to know how the student thinks they could be a contributor and a creator at Cornish College, rather than just a consumer," Forrest says. They are encouraged to list leadership positions they've held in their school and/or progressive initiatives or volunteering they've been part of in their community. They may be leading a recycling campaign at their school or volunteering with seniors.

Cornish's students are very involved in the scholarship process. A student helped craft the scholarship criteria, assessment process and the college captains also review the applications to determine the most worthy student.

This team interviews shortlisted candidates and their parents and also conducts a 'culture check'. They're invited on a college tour and to chat with staff and students to see if they like the school environment. "We want to see if the family's values align with our values," Forrest says.

Current student-led social justice initiatives at Cornish College include the introduction of 'Planet Tuesdays' to commence in 2024 when the canteen only sells plant-based food and a Blue Day, when everyone dresses in blue to raise awareness about the plight of refugees and donate grocery items that are provided to a local refugee community. Student representatives attend a national leadership conference of Uniting Church schools on sustainability issues and also advise the staff body and board on steps they can take to become a five-star sustainable school.

At Camberwell Girls Grammar School in Canterbury in eastern Melbourne, the first step in the scholarship assessment requires all candidates to participate in an hour-and-a-half long interactive session with other candidates. They engage in activities that involve communicating and problem solving working in a group environment.

"Before this session, we take into consideration their scholarship exam, NAPLAN results and school reports. So this face-to-face activity gives our teachers the opportunity to get to know the students in a holistic way. It seems the teachers and students really enjoy it and there's a real buzz to the afternoon," says Fiona Hughes, Camberwell's Admissions Manager.

Senior teachers get to see how the students work with each other in a group, how they take instructions from Camberwell staff, who shows leadership skills, if they show politeness and courtesy to other students, how they listen to each other's opinions and if they have the confidence to voice their own.

There's no way for the students to practice for these collaborative sessions. Students are shortlisted after the results of the interactive session and the exam and then interviewed.

The purpose of the interview is to find out more about the students and their interests. In the latter part of the interview, parents are invited into the room. "We want to get to know them as a family," says Hughes. "If it's a success, we can say this student is a great fit for our school and they think we're a great fit for them. We have a very multicultural school and it's important to us to maintain that."

Camberwell Girls Grammar School offers academics, music/academics, means tested scholarships, indigenous and principal's award scholarships for students from Year 5. Music students must be at a particular grade level in their instrument depending on what year they are applying.

"For the principal's award, we're looking for students who are involved in their community outside of school and they're making a contribution to that community," Hughes says.

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