



Create a Winning Applicant Experience

The definitive guide to creating an intuitive online application process that will help you find the best applicants.

An application process - whether for scholarships, grants or awards - can be a very rewarding yet stressful experience for everyone involved. Applicants put their goals, talents and time on the line, while organizations invest significant resources to find and select the best candidates.

Whether you're running a scholarship, grant or awards program, creating an application process that's clear, intuitive and efficient is extremely important.

A great application process encourages a larger pool of applications, results in happier applicants and is absolutely brilliant marketing for your organization and program.

The overall applicant experience of your process is something that should be carefully considered and crafted. Unfortunately, creating a winning applicant experience is no walk in the park, and many programs simply aren't up to par.

We recently surveyed scholarship applicants across the United States and discovered that upwards of 79% found scholarship application processes to be somewhat difficult, difficult or extremely difficult, and over 50% did not complete applications due to overly complex requirements and processes.

That's why we put together this cheatsheet. Here you'll find tips to help you create a better, more intuitive application process; one that your applicants will love, and one that will thrive.

79% of students applying for scholarships found application processes to be difficult

50% of students applying for scholarships abandoned applications due to overly complex requirements and processes



Right-Size Expectations

Applicants expect there to be work involved in applying for a program or award; however, it's critical that the requirements are balanced with the potential reward. In business, it's a simple formula of (benefits - cost) = net value. In this case, we can look at it as [award - (time + effort)] = net value.

The net value of a program should always be positive, meaning that the amount of work required from applicants should be offset by the value of the award. If this isn't the case, consider revising and simplifying your application process.

Key Takeaway: Don't require the same amount of work to apply for a \$500 award as a \$50,000 award.



Eliminate Redundant Tasks

Chances are, your process has multiple stages. Or perhaps it has returning applicants. Whatever the case, requesting similar information multiple times not only increases applicant fatigue, which encourages incomplete applications, but unnecessarily bogs down your process.

It's important to look at your process through your applicant's eyes, and make sure you're asking for each piece of information once. If you have an applicant on file, see if you can auto-populate fields with their information. Allow applicants to cross-apply for programs that have similar criteria and requirements. And consider adding skip logic to your forms to bypass irrelevant questions. Eliminating redundancies will reduce the burdens placed on your applicants while still ensuring that you get the information you need to make good decisions.

Key Takeaway: Think about the total applicant experience, from applying to multiple awards to re-applying, and see where you can eliminate repetitive tasks.



Take a fresh look at information requirements

It's common for a process to succumb to scope creep. Maybe the board of directors or a donor group really wants to know "X" about your applicants, so you add it to the form. This may seem like a tiny request, but it may exhaust and confuse your applicants.

Make sure your process requirements stay relevant, and ask only for the information that you need to make a decision. Try mapping form questions and tasks directly to acceptance criteria, and remove unnecessary sections that do not directly link to your process. These removed questions and tasks, albeit interesting, can always be asked later, like in a demographic survey.

Key Takeaway: Keep your application process focused on the need to know, not the nice to know.



Escalate requirements by stage

A well-designed application process should look like a funnel. At the top will be all of your applicants, but throughout the process, applicants will be filtered out at each key stage.

Information requests and tasks should be relevant to the specific stage that the applicant is in. Refrain from asking for too much at the beginning of your process. For example, asking for a detailed budget form from applicants who don't meet the basic GPA requirements is not necessary.

At each stage of your process, ask only for the information you need to make a decision on whether the applicant should be moved to the next stage.

Key Takeaway: Make tasks and requests for information stage appropriate.



Communicate

Clear, timely and relevant communication is the unsung hero of a well-run application process, while also being a pillar of courtesy. It's important to explain every step of your process to your applicants so they feel informed, engaged and confident. Smart and relevant communication will help you reduce unnecessary support requests and ensure that applications are completed quickly and properly.

Send emails immediately when forms are completed, applications are received and deadlines are approaching. Target and tailor these communications to maintain relevancy. If for some reason an applicant reaches out to you, respond swiftly and directly. To improve your program's communications, try listing out your entire application process, step-by-step. Then, look for opportunities to set up automated confirmation emails, reminders, and updates at key milestones.

Key Takeaway: Don't leave applicants in the dark about where they are in your process.



Be transparent and add a FAQ section

It probably doesn't come as a surprise to learn that many applicants don't bother to ask for help when they encounter an issue, they simply quit your process. Help applicants help themselves by adding a FAQ section that's easily accessible.

Build your FAQ section by empathizing with your applicants, and by looking at questions or feedback from satisfaction surveys, test applicants, or last year's email folder. Plus, a great FAQ section will reduce support requests and save you a lot of time.

Key Takeaway: Brainstorm possible questions and risks before your program goes live, so that you'll be in a better position to mitigate issues before they happen.



Test your application experience

Recruit test applicants and colleagues to try out your application process before the live launch. Uncovering any unclear language or other hiccups beforehand gives you a chance to make corrections that will reduce barriers to applying and encourage completed applications.

Try using surveys, trained observers, or recording software as tools to give you insight into your process, and make sure to solicit feedback from individuals outside of your organization, to remove any potential bias.

Key Takeaway: Find out what applicants liked or didn't like about your process, and improve for next time.



Survey applicants and seek honest feedback

A great way to find out what applicants really think of your process is to ask them. Not only will this give you ideas about how you can improve your application process, but it also allows you to set benchmarks so that when you do implement improvements, you can see exactly how it made an impact.

Surveying applicants doesn't have to be a chore; there are plenty of simple satisfaction survey templates out there to help you get started right away.

Key Takeaway: Test your process, improve it, and test again.



Centralize your process

To create an exceptional applicant experience, it's important to centralize your application process in one place. Providing applicants with a single portal where they can review requirements, submit applications, track their progress and communicate with administrators makes the entire process simple and intuitive.

A centralized process also allows administrators to reduce administrative burdens and maintain a birdseye view to ensure that every aspect is running as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

Key Takeaway: Become more efficient and agile with a centralized online application.

FluidReview is an online solution that helps organizations effectively manage scholarship, grant and awards programs online. To learn more, visit us at FluidReview.com.