Keeping College Affordable

The Office of Scholarship Programs helps students gain financial support for their educations

BY AMY SHIRES  Illustrations by Adam McCauley

If someone held a competition to determine the worst summer job ever, Brien Flewelling’s stint as a lobster bike taxi driver in his hometown of Unity, Maine, would surely be among the top contenders. “Imagine the corniest thing you can think of,” says Flewelling ’06, an aerospace engineering major in the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science (ECS). “I wore a stupid little hat with a stuffed baby lobster on it, and pedaled tourists around on a giant tricycle that looks like a lobster, charging $10 for 10 minutes.” That less-than-fulfilling professional experience, coupled with his lifelong passion for the study of space, inspired Flewelling to aggressively pursue and secure a NASA internship the summer following his sophomore year. At NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California, he worked on mission design software that allows systems engineers to estimate the cost of a space mission in as little as half an hour. Now a senior and well on his way to the aerospace engineering career of his dreams, Flewelling was recently named an Astronaut Scholar by the Astronaut Scholarship
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Foundation created by the original Mercury 7 astronauts, and was one of 18 selected in a national competition for a $10,000 scholarship. “To be associated with the members of Mercury 7 and to be recognized by American heroes who are pioneers in my field is an honor that is ‘out of this world,’” he says, “as well as my most meaningful accomplishment so far.”

Flewelling came to SU as a Centennial Scholar, a group identified as likely to excel in the college community and contribute to all areas of student life. A member of the national engineering honor society and historian of the University’s chapter of the Golden Key International Honour Society, he was also named a Remembrance Scholar, one of the University’s most prestigious student honors. Flewelling is also a member of SU’s track and field team. A high jumper, he is a three-time Big East Academic All-Star and serves as a tutor for other student-athletes in math, engineering, and physics. “Brien is a wonderful match for the Astronaut Scholarship,” says Professor Can Isik, associate dean for academic and student affairs at ECS, who assisted Flewelling with the application process. “We were very pleased, but not surprised, that he was selected.”

**Matching Talents and Needs**

 Stellar students like Flewelling are found in every college and discipline at Syracuse University. Matching those extraordinary students and their diverse talents with scholarships and other funding opportunities is the responsibility of the Office of Scholarship Programs, which administers University merit-based scholarships and academic and administrative cooperative programs, manages the University’s donor-funded scholarships in collaboration with the Office of Donor Relations, and assists students in searching and applying for externally funded scholarships like the one offered by the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation. The office offers students one-on-one consultations; hosts a listserv, a web site [financialaid.syr.edu/scholarships.htm](http://financialaid.syr.edu/scholarships.htm), and a bulletin board with information about a wide range of scholarship opportunities; publishes a monthly newsletter; and offers small-group seminars that provide students with tips on maximizing their eligibility and promoting themselves effectively. “We try to reach students in every format we can, and in whatever ways they are most comfortable,” says Patricia Johnson, associate director of the four-person office, which is part of SU’s Office of Financial Aid.
Almost 80 percent of SU undergraduates receive some form of financial assistance, including University grants and scholarships, federal and state awards, and outside scholarships. This past academic year, Syracuse University students received more than $4 million in scholarships from external sources, and were awarded nearly $7 million from named funds created by alumni and friends of the University. Yet the purpose of the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarship Programs extends beyond money matters, notes financial aid dean Christopher Walsh. “Our overall mission is providing services and supporting the goals of the University,” he says. Walsh refers to SU’s long history of providing assistance for worthy students from all socio-economic backgrounds—a commitment the Office of Scholarship Programs helps uphold through its services. “To be successful, we reach out to families, paying special attention to communicating precisely and clearly with students, and acting as advocates for them and their families,” he says. “We are concerned about affordability and look at every possible source of funding. Higher education is expensive. The current estimated cost for a year as an undergraduate at Syracuse is $41,500. But we can’t lose sight of the fact that it is really an investment in the students.”

The office manages hundreds of scholarship programs made available to SU students, the majority of which are funded by the University. Upon their admission to Syracuse, students become eligible for merit-based scholarships. The Office of Admissions determines an entering student’s eligibility for these undergraduate scholarships. The Office of Scholarship Programs, which administers these scholarships, also oversees several University-sponsored competitive scholarships, including the College of Arts and Sciences Coronat Scholarship, open to accomplished incoming first-year students majoring in the liberal arts; the Maxwell School-sponsored Citizenship Education Conference Scholarship, which invites leading high school seniors from across the United States to write and defend papers on a public policy issue; and talent-based scholarships in music and art for the College of Visual and Performing Arts.

In some cases, office staff members assist with the selection and awarding process. In other instances, they disburse funds once a student has been selected. “The process of putting together a financial aid package can be complex,” Johnson says. For example, the Army and Air Force ROTC programs award approximately 50 scholarships a year to students they select. The University guarantees a minimum of $8,000 in gift scholarships to those students. “Part of our job is to coordinate that with other financial aid they may be receiving to make sure we are staying within federal and University guidelines for loans and other state and federal aid,” she says.

**Generous Support**

According to Lisa Honan, senior director of donor relations, University-based support often comes in the form of named scholarships created by dedicated alumni and other friends of SU. “To attract and retain the best students, Syracuse must offer scholarships that reward academic excellence, such as Chancellor’s, Founders’ and Dean’s scholarships,” she says. “To maintain diversity and opportunity, it must offer grants that recognize financial need.”

Donors may establish scholarships in their own names or in honor of a loved one, and those funds can be endowed in perpetuity, or they may be supported for a specific number of years. University benefactors may support such programs as the merit-based scholarships offered to incoming first-year students or the Remembrance Scholarship, a senior-year scholarship that was established in memory of the 35 SU students killed in the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103. Or they may establish a scholarship that supports students who are enrolled in a particular school, play a sport, or come from a certain ethnic background or geographic area. The Thomas and Colleen Wilmot Scholarship, for example, endowed by ECS graduate Thomas Wilmot ’70, the Rochester founder of Wilmorite Corporation, provides undergraduate scholarships based on need and merit to students majoring in civil engineering, often students from upstate New York.

“Whether based on need, merit, or both, scholarships tell students they are valued members of the Syracuse University community,” Honan says. “They show students that someone who came before them cared enough to reach out and help a new generation.” She adds that many alumni fund scholarships because they, too, received assis-
tance as SU students and now want to give back. “We collaborate with the Office of Scholarship Programs to ensure that donor-funded scholarships are administered in accordance with the donor’s wishes,” Honan says. “It is a pleasure to work with folks whose entire motivation is to support students as completely as possible. Dean Walsh and his staff have been doing that job for a long time, and nobody does it better.”

Many of the services provided by the Office of Scholarship Programs are geared toward informing students about external scholarships and assisting them with creating an impressive and effective application. The office offers multiple programs to help students identify funding sources and encourage students to explore and research other scholarship opportunities on their own. Additionally, the office advises students and parents against scams charging large fees for services that the office provides free of charge, such as searching for scholarships or completing standard financial aid forms.

External scholarships vary widely in terms of eligibility requirements, the type of granting institution, and the amount of funding provided. Some foundations look for students with high financial need, while many corporations are interested in students who perform well academically. There are specific kinds of eligibility as well. “For example, there are organizations that assist students who have been part of the foster care system,” Johnson says. “There are granting institutions that fund students who are the first in their family to attend college.” Many external scholarships are competitive, and may be connected to a specific discipline or profession. “In this case, it is not only funding that a student receives, but also career connections,” she says. “Regardless of the type of scholarship students apply for, we always tell them that this isn’t just to get financial assistance. It helps them build and write a resume and present themselves positively. This is the first step of a process they’ll practice all their lives.”

Team Effort

Rebecca Blanchard ’04 became familiar with the Office of Scholarship Programs before she even learned she had been accepted at Syracuse University. A broadcast journalism major in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Blanchard underwent what she affectionately recalls as a “grueling 45-minute interview” with Patricia Johnson as part of the application process for a full-tuition Syracuse University scholarship from the Central New York chapter of Junior Achievement, a worldwide nonprofit economic education organization. “My father is deceased, and my mom was having financial difficulties at the time,” says Blanchard, now a weekend reporter with WTVH 5 Eyewitness News, the CBS television affiliate in Syracuse. “Without the scholarship, we didn’t know how I was going to pay for college.”

Nisha Gupta G’05 is also grateful for the assistance and guidance she received from the Office of Scholarship Programs. As a doctoral student, she applied for a Bill and Melinda Gates Millennium Scholarship in 2000, the program’s inaugural year—the only time it was offered to graduate students. “The scholarship office contacted me to inform me I was eligible,” says Gupta, now associate director of professional development programs in the Graduate School. When she learned how extensive the application process was, she questioned whether it was worth applying. “I was a 35-year-old doctoral student with a young child, busy taking classes and teaching,” she says. The application was basically designed for incoming freshmen and asked for detailed information about her education and leadership experiences that was no longer easily accessible for her. “Pat Johnson encouraged me to go ahead with it, so I did,” Gupta says. “When I received the award, I got a certified letter in the mail. And the first person I wanted to tell was someone in the scholarship office, because they had been so helpful.”

That kind of personal attention is evident in everything the office does. Collaboration is key to the role its four staff members play in assuring students a successful SU experience. Throughout the year, they work closely with students and families, with deans and faculty in the individual schools and colleges, and with other offices on campus. “We assist the Office of Donor Relations in the selection of students to meet the criteria for more than 700 endowed and restricted accounts,” Johnson says. “We collaborate with the Parents Office to do a presentation for Parents Weekend. We work with the Office of Human Resources to administer the Dependent Tuition Benefit and Tuition Exchange programs for students whose parents are University employees. With the Center for Career Services and the Writing Program, we help students create better application essays and resumes. And we administer all the athletic awards, so we regularly team up with the Department of Athletics.”

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als and agencies that provide scholarships. “Part of our job is to use the additional funding that comes from loyal benefactors in the spirit in which it was given,” Walsh says. One such benefactor is the Otto Sussman Trust, which has awarded SU students almost $1 million to date, typically giving individual students between $3,000 and $5,000. The trust was created in 1947 according to the will of Sussman, a mining engineer who had been CEO of one of America’s largest mining companies. In 1984, Edward S. Miller ’51, a trustee of the trust, added Syracuse students to the eligibility list, which is limited to students who are residents of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma. The trust does not confer scholarships, but makes a one-time award to students experiencing unexpected, short-term financial need due to special circumstances such as unemployment, illness, or a death in the family. “At the start of the school year, Pat Johnson notifies about 100 students who might qualify,” Miller says. “She then winnows out about a dozen, based on their situations, and sends us financial analyses, financial aid forms, grade transcripts, and letters from students describing one-time needs. Due to the good screening of the Office of Scholarship Programs, our approval rate is 85 to 90 percent.”

Teamwork also played a part in Brien Flewelling’s success in obtaining the Astronaut Foundation Scholarship, which involved the joint efforts of Office of Scholarship Programs staff and ECS faculty and administrators. “The process required working with the engineering faculty to ensure they understood the criteria for the award and getting letters of recommendation and other information we needed from the college in a timely manner,” says scholarship programs manager Maura Iванick, who also assisted Flewelling with the application. “It’s an exciting collaborative project to make sure all the pieces come together on time.” ECS’s Can Isik agrees that working with the Office of Scholarship Programs is a key part of getting deserving students the financial support they need. “It is a great partnership that entails a lot of personal contact,” he says. “Scholarships like the one Brien was awarded are useful not only for the students who receive them, but also for the funding agency, because we are providing them with excellent candidates. The University benefits as well from increased visibility for our top programs through our select students.”

According to Johnson, the biggest challenges for the Office of Scholarship Programs are keeping up with the ever-changing variety and range of scholarships and getting more students to apply. “We encourage students to look at the success stories,” she says. “Generally, those who are successful have applied for a number of scholarships. They have been persistent. So we tell students not to get discouraged. It isn’t always an easy process. It isn’t handed to them. But we want students to know it can be done, and that we are here to assist them.”

That kind of persistence allowed Flewelling to blast off on the journey of a lifetime—one that led from a small town in Maine to the vast and infinite adventure of exploring outer space. “They practically threw me a parade in my hometown, because people from Unity just don’t get opportunities like the ones I’ve had,” says Flewelling, the first in his family to attend college. The combination of scholarships he received while at Syracuse considerably diminished the debt he’ll owe after graduating in May. He’s grateful for the freedom that allows him as he pursues opportunities for graduate study. “I don’t know exactly what I want to do or where I want to go, but I know I won’t have to turn down any option,” he says. “I can go wherever the search takes me.”