

First Independent Scholarship Winners Survey October 2011

Background

In 1984 the late E. W. Firstenburg, longtime CEO and Chairman of First Independent, established an endowment of \$300,000 at Clark College to provide \$2,000 scholarships for incoming freshmen. Between three and six scholarships are awarded a year, depending on the financial performance of the endowment.

As the program entered its 26th year, the question of how students pay for college has become a major topic of discussion. Tuition costs are soaring while a tight economy has forced many businesses, including First Independent, to reduce their overall community contributions. At the same time, individuals with a college degree are doing much better in the tough economy. Education is clearly linked to career success.

Because the scholarships had been given for 26 years, First Independent believed the recipient base could provide a valuable perspective on what the impact of the scholarship had been.

The cooperation of Clark College was a key to the project, since they selected the 132 winners and maintained the address list for former students. It was assumed that addresses for many students might not be up to date. In addition, some winners included by the college in the list were not funded by First Independent. However this was a very limited number of respondents.

Because of the limited sample we narrowed the scope of the research by asking just one rating scale (1-5) question and five open ended questions.

First Independent Bank wanted to answer three questions:

- * What impact did the scholarship have on recipients achieving their educational goals?
- *What advice did they have for students preparing for college in 2011?
- *What advice did they have for businesses on how to structure and promote scholarships?

Results and Findings

A total of 131 surveys were mailed and 25 valid responses were received. This is a response rate of over 18%, which is considered very good for this type of survey. Approximately 40 percent of the respondents received scholarships before 2000 and 60 percent between 2001 and 2010.

All students considered the scholarship a critical element in reaching their educational goals. On a five point scale, half gave it the highest score - a "5 - critical" and half said it was a "4 -important". No lower scores were received.

Some of the comments (made by multiple respondents and consistent regardless of what year the scholarship was received) included:

"My family could not help me in any way. The scholarship gave me the start I needed."

"Gave me hope and the ability to get started."

"Allowed me to get started right."

"Relieved a great deal of stress."

"My husband passed away recently. The help from this scholarship years ago helped me get an education and care for my family and help my kids get ready for college."

Respondents' advice for students was also consistent regardless of the year the award was received and fell into three categories. Comments are listed in order of the number of people responding with this thought:

- "Don't incur any more student loans than absolutely necessary, which is why community colleges like Clark are so great."
- "Start early in learning about scholarships, apply for as many as possible and don't give up."
- "Finish school as quickly as you can and don't work more than you have to."
- "Study what you love, follow your passion and keep your grades up."

Their advice for organizations like First Independent on offering scholarships was also consistent:

- "Please keep giving, the need is great."
- "Help other businesses understand the great value community colleges offer."
- "Do even more to publicize the availability of scholarships."

Several respondents also suggested that First Independent provide applicants with information on basic financial management since they were not prepared to manage their finances when they left for college.