

Transforming Recognition into Impact: The Creation of a Named Scholarship

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

As their valued colleague approached retirement, librarians at James E. Walker Library mobilized to establish and distribute a named scholarship in her honor, recognizing her dedication to student learning. This article explores the many steps involved in creating, funding, and awarding a new scholarship. The authors consider effective strategies and lessons learned along the way.

Transforming Recognition into Impact: The Creation of a Named Scholarship

In the fall of 2024, librarians at Middle Tennessee State University's James E. Walker Library began exploring the idea of establishing a student scholarship to honor the legacy of a beloved colleague. As the longtime Distance Learning Services Librarian, Sharon Parente dedicated her career to supporting student learning, information literacy, and access to library resources. Recognizing the transformative impact of scholarships on student success, the group sought to create a lasting tribute reflecting Sharon's commitment to helping students achieve their academic goals.

This article presents a case study of the development of the Sharon Campbell Parente Scholarship, from the initial concept through fundraising and implementation. It examines the motivations for establishing the scholarship, the decision-making process for identifying the intended recipients, and the strategies used to secure the financial resources needed to create an endowed fund. The article also reflects on lessons learned throughout the process, including the opportunities and challenges associated with donor engagement, scholarship development, and cross-campus collaboration. By sharing this experience, the authors hope to provide practical insights for libraries and other academic units interested in creating named scholarships that support student success while honoring the contributions of valued colleagues.

Background

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is a regional comprehensive public university located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Serving more than 20,000 students, the institution offers a broad range of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs and is recognized for its commitment to student success, access, and affordability.

In recent years, MTSU has significantly expanded its online education offerings in response to growing student demand for flexible learning opportunities. The university has increased its fully online degree programs from 16 to more than 30, while enrollment in online courses continues to grow. As this population has expanded, so too has the need to provide services and support tailored to the unique circumstances of online learners. Many online students balance their academic pursuits with professional, family, and community responsibilities, often engaging with the university from a distance. Supporting their success requires intentional approaches that address both access and engagement, making online students an important population for targeted scholarship and student success initiatives.

The James E. Walker Library serves as the academic heart of the university, supporting the teaching, learning, and research needs of the MTSU community. The library welcomes more than 525,000 visitors annually and provides a wide range of services designed to support student achievement and academic engagement. These services include research assistance, reference services, course-integrated instruction, individual and group consultations, and access to extensive print and electronic collections. Faculty librarians work closely with other faculty, staff, and students to develop information literacy skills, support scholarly inquiry, and connect users with the resources necessary for academic success.

As a student-centered organization, Walker Library has long sought opportunities to reduce barriers to student achievement and promote equitable access to educational resources and support services. This commitment to student success provided a natural foundation for conversations about establishing a scholarship that would both honor the contributions of a distinguished librarian and provide meaningful financial assistance to students pursuing their educational goals.

At MTSU, all student scholarships are administered through the MTSU Foundation in partnership with the University Advancement Division. As library faculty began exploring the creation of a new scholarship, it was important to consult with central advancement professionals who guide the development, management, and stewardship of scholarship funds. Their expertise was essential in navigating the process and ensuring that the scholarship aligned with university policies and donor expectations.

Establishing a new scholarship involves a series of important decisions, including determining the scholarship's name, purpose, eligibility criteria, and intended recipients. Additional considerations include identifying the scholarship's funding model, establishing award parameters, and developing the governing agreement that outlines how funds will be awarded and managed over time. Early collaboration with University Advancement and Foundation staff helped the library team refine its vision and develop a framework for a scholarship to honor a valued colleague while providing meaningful support to MTSU students.

Early Conceptualization of the Scholarship

With over 42 years of service to the university in a variety of reference and liaison librarian roles, Sharon Parente was a well-known, respected, and beloved professional both within the library and across campus. Students recognized her at the reference desk as the compassionate lady who would take the time needed to fully respond to their inquiries. Colleagues sought Sharon's expertise not only in librarianship but also her far-reaching institutional knowledge. More than a knowledgeable librarian, however, it was her upbeat personality that solidified Sharon's place as a library treasure. She celebrated life, bringing sweet treats for colleagues on Fridays and organizing annual library celebrations. But by the fall 2024 semester, Sharon's coworkers realized she was approaching the end of her MTSU career. They unanimously agreed that such a colleague and career needed to be honored, and a small planning committee quickly mobilized.

Several ideas for long-term recognition were considered, including naming a library space in Sharon's honor. Ultimately, a named student scholarship was chosen because this concept most aligned with Sharon's professional mission of student success. Although Sharon was still working at Walker Library at the time, the committee decided to establish the scholarship before she retired so she could provide input on its design and administration, and perhaps even help select the first recipient.

Creation of the Scholarship

Efforts to get the scholarship in place began in earnest at the beginning of the spring 2025 semester. Two of Sharon's colleagues (her department chair, Kristen West, and a librarian, Karen Nourse) approached the library's dean with the idea of an endowed

scholarship to honor Sharon. Dean Kathleen Schmand enthusiastically supported the initiative, and after surprising Sharon with the happy news of the honor, the three colleagues, who comprised the planning committee, began drafting the documents needed to formalize the scholarship.

The planning committee's first task was to decide upon the eligibility criteria. As discussions evolved, the committee identified online students as a population that could benefit from additional financial support. A scholarship designed specifically for online students offered an opportunity to both recognize their unique challenges and expand support for their educational pursuits. This student group also aligned with Sharon's early professional experiences supporting distance learning services (which later evolved into online learning librarianship), including her leadership in embedded librarian pedagogy. The first eligibility requirement, therefore, stipulated that applicants must be enrolled in an online degree program or have taken at least two online courses.

The planning committee also needed to consider whether certain recipients should be prioritized. Many MTSU scholarships benefit students enrolled in specific academic programs, and so a precedent already existed for such an arrangement. The group decided to give preferential consideration to students enrolled in Sharon's liaison areas of Journalism, Communication Studies, Social Work, and Library Science as an additional tribute to her work. They also decided to make the scholarship available to undergraduate juniors and seniors, as well as graduate students, since many existing scholarships benefit incoming freshmen.

The planning committee then faced the difficult process of drafting the essay prompts required for the scholarship application. The group decided to require applicants to write three short essays, with a minimum of 200-500 words per prompt, on the following topics:

- Please tell us how you came to MTSU and how you chose your major or degree program.
- Provide a short reflection on how you have sought assistance in searching for and locating MTSU Library research materials for assignments in your online classes. What were your experiences in using the library resources, whether they were human or electronic?
- How would the scholarship help you financially within the next 12 months?

The planning committee chose to give applicants the opportunity to tell a compelling personal story and to assist the selection committee in its difficult task of identifying one scholarship recipient. They also hoped that essays on such personal topics would be more difficult to fabricate using generative artificial intelligence (AI). To discourage AI use, the application included the following statement: "The scholarship committee condones the use of AI tools to aid in writing and proofreading your essay. However, if the committee determines that your paper is blatantly AI-generated, including plagiarized, it can result in disqualification."

With these guidelines in place, the planning committee drafted the necessary documentation needed prior to contacting the university's development office. This

scholarship documentation included an overview, the award amount and frequency, eligibility criteria, and essay prompts for student applicants. Dean Schmand worked with the library's Director of Development, Katie Enzor, and by February 2025, the scholarship was officially listed within the MTSU Foundation and could receive funds.

Funding the Scholarship

To transition the newly established scholarship from a conceptual framework to a fully funded, self-sustaining endowment, the development team, headed by Katie Enzor, designed a strategic, multi-phased fundraising effort. While academic endowments typically require multi-year timelines to mature, the team aimed to secure the necessary commitments alongside immediate capital within a compressed, highly ambitious twelve-month window. Accomplishing this goal required a deliberate blend of traditional major-gift fundraising, targeted digital campaigns, and community-driven micro-philanthropy.

Rather than relying on a single, broad appeal, the funding model was structured into three phases to build momentum, shifting sequentially from high-touch, personal outreach to vibrant public engagement over the course of the fiscal year. This funding model is described as follows:

Phase I: The Quiet Phase and Leadership Giving

The fundraising journey began with a traditional "quiet phase" focused on securing foundational leadership gifts. Prior to publicizing the fund, the development team quietly engaged close colleagues, retired university library staff, and key internal stakeholders. This targeted, personal outreach aimed to secure early, pace-setting commitments from those who had worked alongside Sharon and felt a profound personal connection to her legacy.

However, the development team quickly encountered an unexpected challenge. While there was immense interest in honoring Sharon, many prospective donors were unsure how to structure their giving to achieve the deep, dedicated impact envisioned to honor Sharon's legacy. Without the immediate anchor gifts they hoped would establish baseline credibility and quickly build an endowed fund, the development team realized they needed to make the opportunity feel more tangible. Embracing this learning curve, the team went back to the drawing board, refined the messaging, and geared up to leverage the energy of the university's annual giving days.

Phase II: MTSU's True Blue Give 2026

With a modest financial base quickly established, the team pivoted its energy toward a public-facing effort. The central catalyst for this shift occurred in February 2026 during Middle Tennessee State University's annual giving days, True Blue Give. Seizing this high-visibility moment, Katie Enzor worked with the Annual Giving Team in the Development Office to design and execute a vibrant, multi-channel outreach strategy.

The collaborative efforts included targeted email appeals, institutional newsletter features, and highly coordinated social media pushes. Rather than focusing purely on cold financial figures, the messaging deliberately connected the scholarship's logistical mechanics directly to Sharon's warmth and legacy of student support. By illustrating how the fund would specifically benefit online students—a demographic facing unique, often

invisible access barriers—the development team made the case for support in a deeply personal way. This emotional resonance translated directly into action, converting affection for Sharon into tangible digital contributions from alumni, faculty, and lifelong friends. By the close of the giving days, the collective efforts had raised over \$5,000, putting the scholarship fund firmly on its way.

Phase III: The Matching Gift Challenge

To combat the mid-campaign plateau that so often stalls year-long initiatives, the development team introduced a powerful new catalyst in the late spring of 2026. After hearing about the scholarship through university fundraising efforts and witnessing the community's response during Giving Day, a longtime supporter of the library approached Katie Enzor with an idea: a dollar-for-dollar matching challenge of up to \$10,000. The match transformed the campaign's trajectory, motivating new gifts and helping the scholarship gain momentum during a critical stage of fundraising.

The match created an authentic sense of urgency and offered the donor community a beautiful incentive—the opportunity to see their personal contributions double in real time. Knowing that every dollar would stretch twice as far re-energized the funding campaign momentum and inspired a wave of first-time donors who realized their collective giving carried immense weight. Crucially, this momentum also inspired deeper commitments; in under two weeks, the scholarship successfully secured long-term, five-year pledges to fully maximize the matching gift, dramatically accelerating its progress toward the endowment threshold.

In the final phase of the scholarship's funding efforts, the focus shifted from active solicitation to closing the remaining funding gap and establishing a rigorous, grateful donor stewardship framework. By providing transparent, real-time progress updates to the growing network of supporters, the development team cultivated a shared sense of community pride and ownership in reaching the finish line. This journey proved that successful fundraising is not merely about transactions, but about connection. By inviting donors along for every step of the journey, the development team and planning committee did more than just fund an endowment; they built a community dedicated to keeping Sharon Parente's spirit of student-centered service alive for generations of online students.

Awarding the Scholarship

While the development team worked diligently on their multi-phased funding plan, the planning committee put additional necessary infrastructure into place so that the first \$500 scholarship could be awarded in January 2026. At this time, the development team was still in Phase I of their plan; therefore, the scholarship had only minimal funding and was not at the level of maturity at which an endowment would generate regular disbursements. Despite this circumstance, the planning committee chose to move forward with the first scholarship award. Knowing that Sharon planned to retire in Spring 2026, committee members wanted to ensure she had the opportunity to present the scholarship to its inaugural recipient.

Librarian Karen Nourse had previously worked on a different Walker Library student scholarship committee. She took the lead in creating marketing materials to advertise the scholarship and in developing rubrics to score applicant essays. She also assembled a committee to review applications and select a recipient. With these steps in place, plans to award one scholarship for the 2025-2026 academic year proceeded.

The library's marketing team advertised the scholarship on the library's website and sent emails to campus subscribers, including students and program directors of the preferred degree programs (Journalism, Social Work, Communication Studies, and Library Science). On November 3, 2025, the scholarship was officially opened to applicants on the library website, with an application deadline of December 15. Within this six-week period, the library received 191 completed applications. In keeping with the original criteria, the selection committee prioritized the 25 applicants from Sharon's liaison areas (Journalism, Communication Studies, Social Work, and Library Science) and reviewed the submissions according to the scoring rubric. The committee adjourned for the winter break and returned to the library in early January 2026. On January 21, 2026, the committee met to discuss applications and select a scholarship recipient.

In reviewing applications, members of the committee were concerned by the possible abuse of generative AI in creating essay responses. Although the scholarship's AI statement permitted the use of AI for proofreading and editing, applicants were supposed to do their own writing rather than use AI to generate the essays. A few applications were obviously created through AI because the applicants had simply copied and pasted the text, including their original prompt language; these applicants were therefore easy to remove from consideration. But most submissions were not so easy to determine. Although many essays seemed flat and lacked descriptive details, it was difficult to know whether this was due to AI use or simply the author's writing style.

Fortunately, one applicant rose to the top through her personal story of overcoming difficulties as a non-traditional, international student seeking to complete her studies at MTSU. Raquel Barbalet, a graduate student in the Media & Communication program, demonstrated personal integrity and a commitment to lifelong learning in her writing. She was exactly the type of student who embodied the values that Sharon exhibited to all who knew her. On February 4, 2026, Sharon Parente and Dean Schmand presented Raquel Barbalet with a certificate documenting receipt of the scholarship (Figure 1). This occasion was an achievement not only for the worthy scholarship recipient but also for everyone involved in bringing the Sharon Campbell Parente Scholarship to fruition.

Figure 1

Sharon Campbell Parente Scholarship Namesake and First Scholarship Recipient, with the Library Dean



Note: This photograph depicts Sharon Parente, Distance Learning Services Librarian, Raquel Barbalet, the inaugural scholarship recipient, and Kathleen Schmand, Dean of the James E. Walker Library (L-R), in February 2026.

Future Considerations

Although the Sharon Campbell Parente Scholarship selection committee has awarded its first recipient, the work of the various groups behind this project is not over. The development team is continuing its efforts to bring the scholarship to full endowment, a goal that is now almost realized due to the generosity of matching donor funds in early 2026. The selection committee will meet annually to award the scholarship, manage its marketing across various channels, receive and review applications, and ultimately select one recipient. In addition to the annual scholarship award, the committee continues to refine its processes, including the essay prompts and evaluation rubric. The question of how to safeguard applications from AI-generated essays is still an issue the committee must evaluate, particularly as the technology evolves.

Conclusion

Establishing a named scholarship requires extensive planning and implementation, not only within the library but also across campus. Such an ambitious project is best realized through a team approach, leveraging the talents of people personally connected to and motivated by the project's goals. It is important to reach out to campus partners, such as the development office, to ensure compliance with institutional policies. As our

development team realized, funding a named scholarship requires personal messaging to generate the best results.

It is also significant not to lose sight of the reasons for a named scholarship. Creation of the scholarship is a powerful and lasting way to honor someone, in our case, a beloved colleague at the end of her professional career. On the other side of the coin are the scholarship recipients. As the robust applicant pool demonstrated, even a modest \$500 scholarship is valuable to students. The work required of library personnel to sustain this scholarship is not simple; however, the joy of awarding the funds to a deserving student is its own reward.