With support from generous alumni, Washington University is helping a new generation of aspiring medical professionals minimize student debt. More than 80 percent of its medical students receive financial aid, primarily in the form of scholarships.

“We’ve always tried to see that anyone who has the ability and the desire to be a student at Washington University is given the opportunity,” said Larry J. Shapiro, MD, executive vice chancellor for medical affairs and dean of the School of Medicine. “We’re proud of the fact that our medical students have among the lowest debt of any medical students in the country,” he said.
Psychology of scholarships
Scholarships are a top priority for Gammon Earhart, PT, PhD, director of the Program in Physical Therapy.

“We want to continue to attract the best and the brightest physical therapy students, and to do that we need to be sure that they have the support they need,” she said. “That includes support from our faculty and staff for academic endeavors, but also financial support so they know that they can graduate with a manageable debt load,” she said.

Scholarships also have psychological benefits, Earhart said. “Students who receive scholarships feel welcomed. They feel like we have identified them as the best of the best and that we really want them to be here.”

Matthew Mastenbrook, DPT ’17, would agree. “I really want to work hard to show that I deserve the scholarship, and that I can make the person who gave it proud,” he said.

Shirley Sahrmann, PT, PhD, professor emerita of physical therapy, has created two scholarships, including the one awarded to Mastenbrook, and plans to create more as she leads fundraising efforts among alumni.

Sahrmann wants to help talented students “be at peace” with the choices they have made, and live their lives without the worry of student debt.

Sahrmann said that the program’s strong research component, an outgrowth of collaborations with the medical school, offers students the opportunity to “do incredible things.” “Students are exposed in every which way to people who are on the cutting edge.”

Such a dynamic environment can’t help but produce top practitioners and leaders, she said. “I get to travel around the country, and I’m always so pleased when I hear from clinicians saying, ‘Oh, we hired one of your amazing graduates,’” Sahrmann said.

“To think I can play some little role in helping people get on with their lives not only as professionals, but also in their personal lives, is really important to me.”

Reasons for giving
Retired Col. William P. Wiesmann, MD ’72, president and CEO of bioSTAR Inc., created scholarships because he wants others to “experience the wonderful things” he experienced at Washington University.

“When I came as a freshman I could get into a laboratory right away and start doing research with some very wonderful people,” he said.

“I had the chance to do some really fundamental basic science. I was able to write papers in medical school, which was a fantastic opportunity for me. It set me on my career path at that point.”

Wiesmann spent the majority of his career as a research scientist for government organizations such as NASA, and later became an entrepreneur.

“I’ve been looking back and thinking, ‘What were the things that made a difference in my life, and allowed me to get to where I am?’” Wiesmann said. “Some of those things have to do with being free to do what you want to do — being free to be passionate about what you love to do.”

A full-tuition scholarship enabled Vernetta Harris, MD ’04, to graduate from the School of Medicine with relatively little debt. Harris began practicing medicine in Atlanta, and eventually became a medical director of an emergency department in Tennessee. Being on sound financial footing allowed her to make the move, she said. “I felt like I was empowered to make changes, some call it risk, without thinking of the financial consequences.”

Harris also took some time off from clinical practice to participate in relief efforts in Ghana and Jamaica. “I would not have been able to do that so early in my career if I had had a large amount of financial stress.”

Harris funds scholarships to help others in the way she was helped.

“I know how big a boost and blessing it was to me, and I wanted to provide that to other students. Hardworking, talented students should be rewarded.”

Degrees of debt
Scholarships and financial aid help Washington University School of Medicine students graduate with far less debt on average compared to students at other medical schools.

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<th>AVERAGE AMOUNTS OF STUDENT DEBT</th>
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<tr>
<td>$200,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>$160,000</td>
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$181,058 Private
$162,736 Public
$91,124 WUSM