The National Merit Scholarship Program is an academic competition for recognition and scholarships that began in 1955. High school students enter the National Merit Program by taking the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test – a test which serves as an initial screen of more than 1.5 million entrants each year – and by meeting published program entry/participation requirements.

Several stages of recognition are involved: First commended students are notified, then Semifinalists are announced, and in February, the Finalists are revealed. Final Scholarship Winners are chosen from the Finalist Group.

To ensure that academically talented young people from all parts of the United States are included in this talent pool, Semifinalists are designated on a state representational basis. They are the highest scoring entrants in each state.