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Some Insights Into Computerized Scholarship Search Service

by Steven Thorndill

One of the questions that comes up more and more frequently from both prospective students and their parents is whether or not it is advisable to apply for scholarships through one of the computer search organizations. The number of these organizations has been increasing rapidly in recent years. Many financial aid administrators have thought that it would be enlightening to test out one of these organizations to see what responses would be generated. This article chronicles the author's application to one of these companies, and subsequently, an overall review of the aid sources provided as well as follow-up responses from the organizations which actually award the funds. It should not be looked at as a scientific review of scholarship search companies in general. Rather it should be viewed as a sharing of personal and professional insight on the part of the author. The service picked was one that has had an excellent reputation over the years for providing tasteful, reliable printed source information for college-bound students. It was guessed to be one of the best computerized scholarship searches now available.

The actual personal data submitted to the service was fictitious. The applicant, a prospective freshman, was a white male of Irish-Polish ancestry, and also a member of the Lutheran Church of America. He was hard-of-hearing and in the top 5% of his high school class. His career interests were the ministry or computer programming. He listed potential majors in religion, computer science, mathematics, or business administration. The applicant also was a member of the debate team, his student council and a computer club. Other organizations that the student participated in were the YMCA, the Boys Club and Explorer Scouts. Work experience included work at the YMCA, for the Young Republicans and a local supermarket. His father was deceased, having been a disabled Army veteran of a foreign war. His mother had served in the Air Force and was now employed at a large corporation in the area. His mother's affiliative organizations included a Catholic social organization, the Urban League, the Democratic party, and Kiwanis.

After submitting the questionnaire and a check for \$45, a list of seventeen suggested scholarship sources plus other promised information was received. A letter was then sent to each of these sponsoring organizations requesting that an application be sent to the author's home address. Eleven of the seventeen organizations responded within two months. The remaining six were contacted a second time. Four of those six eventually responded. Ultimately, out of seventeen requests, information was received back from fifteen organizations.

A rating schedule was employed in tallying the initial responses received from the service and the subsequent responses received from the organizations. The ratings devised were as follows:

Good - The information was such that the applicant likely would not have received this or similar information by contacting colleges or by attending a

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college fair. In addition the applicant appeared fully qualified to apply for the award.

Fair - The information was such that the applicant likely would not have received this or similar information by contacting colleges or by attending a college fair. From the information the applicant submitted, however, it was not possible to tell if the applicant was fully eligible to apply for the award.

Poor - From the information submitted on the questionnaire, the applicant was clearly ineligible for the award; or the applicant could not apply for the award within the next year; or the information was such that the applicant probably could have received it or similar information from colleges or by attending a college fair.

No Response - No response was received back from the scholarship organization.

Tally of Ratings

	Information Provided by the Scholarship Service	Follow-Up Information Received From the Sponsoring Organizations
Good	6	3
Fair	4	2
Poor	7	10
No Response	NA	2
Total	17	17

Initially 10 of the 17 sources of aid received from the service were rated as good or fair matches with the student's profile. When information was received back from the organizations, however, only 5 of the 17 final matches were rated as either good or fair.

The following are the actual responses received from the service and/or the sponsoring organizations. Please note that the ratings do not in any way "rate" the actual sponsoring organizations. The ratings are only the author's perception of how well-coordinated the match was between the information reported on the applicant's questionnaire and the eligibility criteria received back from the service and from the sponsoring organizations. Indeed, an organization with a poor match in this report might well offer an excellent scholarship program.

The American Veterans' Memorial Scholarship - The scholarship service indicated that "this renewable \$1,000 award is available to high school graduating seniors. Applicants must be children of disabled or deceased veterans." This appeared a good match from the service. When contacting the organization, they indicated they appreciated the applicant's interest and would send him an application prior to the opening competition of their 1983-84 program. Thus it also appeared a good match with the organization's supplied criteria.

America's United Research Foundation - Ernestine Matthews Trust Scholarship - The information that came back from the scholarship service indicated that "this renewable award is available to high school graduating seniors who rank in the top one third of their class. Applicants cannot smoke or use alcoholic beverages." Nowhere in the source questionnaire did they ask whether or not the applicant smoked or used alcoholic beverages. Thus the match was considered fair. The response from the organization was consistent with the information received from the service and thus it retained its fair rating.

Amoco Foundation Scholarship for Freshmen - The service indicated "this renewable award is available to high school graduating seniors who are planning a career in business, science or engineering. Applicants must attend one of the participating colleges specified by the sponsor." The match was considered fair. Although the applicant indicated career plans of the ministry or computer programming on his questionnaire, he did indicate a potential major in business administration. When information was received back from the service, they indicated that the "scholarships are granted to junior and senior college students and focus on engineering and the physical sciences. Scholarships are established at selected colleges and universities which solely administer the program." A list was enclosed of the 39 colleges and universities that participated in the program. None of the colleges on this list were indicated as among the ten colleges favored by the applicant and listed on his questionnaire. In addition, the service specifically had indicated freshmen, but the sponsoring organization indicated that only college juniors and seniors would be considered. Thus the final match was poor.

Association for Computing Machinery - The service indicated that "this nonrenewable award is available to undergraduate students. Applicants must be majoring in computer programming and submit a paper on computers and their applications." This seemed a very good match. From the information received directly from the organization it was indeed a good match.

Automotive Boosters Club - The scholarship service indicated that "this renewable \$1,600 award is available to high school graduating seniors. Applicants must be planning a career in business, management, science or engineering." The match appeared fair at best. Information received from the organization itself indicated that "the Trustees have elected to use one school of higher learning. The school adopted is Norwood Institute at Midland, Michigan, for scholarships to their automotive programs. If you care to attend this specific school please send your high school transcripts and resume of yourself." This proved to be a very poor match.

Bell and Howell Education Group National Scholarship Competition - According to the scholarship service "this nonrenewable \$1100 award is available to high school graduating seniors. Applicants must be majoring in computer science." This seemed a good match. Subsequently the information received back directly from the organization indicated that applicants must attend one of their specified Bell and Howell Institutes. The rating dropped to poor.

S and H Company - Beinecke Memorial Scholarship Program - Since the scholarship service indicated that "this nonrenewable \$4,000 award is available to college seniors and graduate students" and the applicant was a prospective freshmen, it was a very poor match. When this organization was contacted, a postcard was sent back stating "I regret that I am unable to comply with your request for an application for the Beinecke Memorial Scholarship Program. All applicants must be college juniors and must be nominated by the college they are attending. A limited number of colleges are invited to submit nominations to the Program." No list of the colleges was provided. The final rating remained poor.

Gordon and Storey Scholarship Program - The scholarship service indicated that "this nonrenewable \$1000 reward is available to high school graduating seniors. Applicants must be active in school and community organizations." From the description the match appeared very good. Unfortunately two separate letters were returned by the post office indicating they were undeliverable as addressed. In both cases the addresses were exactly written as provided by the service. Thus this shows as a no response.

Alexander Graham Bell Scholarship Awards - The service indicated "this renewable award is available to undergraduate and graduate students who are

profoundly deaf. Applicants must attend a regular college for the hearing impaired and must submit an audio-gram." As the applicant only indicated that he was hard of hearing, and not "profoundly deaf," this is listed as a poor match. Subsequently data from the organization was consistent and the rating remained poor.

Eddy Latshaw Student Loan Fund - The service said "this renewable \$1500 loan is available to college junior, senior and graduate students. Applicants must be of exceptional character." This again was considered a poor match because of the student's prospective freshman status. No response was received back from the organization after two letters.

Education Communications Incorporated Scholarship - According to the scholarship service they indicated that "this nonrenewable \$1,000 award is available to high school graduating seniors. Guidance counselors have applications." Since it did not list any other specific eligibility requirement, the match was only listed as a fair match. When information was received back from the organization, it further indicated that the scholarship was to recognize outstanding student leaders. Since the fictitious student might well have fit into this category, the final rating was upgraded to good.

Jaycee War Memorial Fund Scholarship - According to the scholarship service "this nonrenewable \$1,000 award is available to high school graduating seniors. Applicants must show evidence of outstanding leadership abilities. Local Jaycee chapters have applications." The match from the service was considered good. When receiving back information from the organization, similar criteria were repeated although it also indicated that there was also a financial need criteria. As this financial need criteria initially should have been mentioned by the scholarship source, but was not, the final match was only fair.

National Guard and Reserves Educational Assistance Program - The scholarship service indicated that "this renewable award is available to high school graduating seniors. Applicants must enlist for a total of six years of the selective reserves of the National Guard." This was listed as a poor match as information on this option is readily available from other sources and was not a unique match for this applicant. The material received back from the organization was consistent with the information received from the source and thus the rating remained poor.

Pickett and Hatcher Educational Fund Loan - The service indicated that "this renewable loan is available to undergraduate students. Applicants may not be majoring in law, medicine or ministry or attending business or vocational colleges." Since the applicant clearly indicated that one of his career possibilities was the ministry, the match was poor. When information was received from the organization, it was even a poorer match. They indicated that "although your interest is appreciated, application blanks are not being sent because the Trustees of this fund have adopted a policy showing preference to students who are residents of the Southeastern portion of the United States. (The fictitious student's application was from the Pacific Northwest.) The change in policy was made because of the large number of applications requesting amounts of assistance greater than we were able to provide. Unfortunately we do not have an unlimited amount of money available."

Hattie M. Strong Foundation Loans - The scholarship service indicated that "this nonrenewable loan is available to college seniors and graduate students who are attending a four year college, university or graduate school." This was a very poor match for this prospective freshman. The information from the organization confirmed this eligibility criteria and the match remained a poor one.

United Student Aid Fund Program - According to the service "this renewable loan is available to undergraduate and graduate students. Applicants must attend

one of the United Student Aid Program participating schools." Since this organization mainly processes Guaranteed Student Loans and since students can obtain such loan information from any college or university, this was not a unique match and was thus listed as poor. The information received from the organization was consistent with the source information. Thus the poor rating stands.

Ethel Dow Wells Foundation Scholarship - According to the scholarship service "this renewable \$4,000 award is available to high school seniors. Applicants must be exceptional students in all areas." This seemed a good match. On a postcard received back from the organization it was indicated that "since the foundation has very limited resources, the Trustees have adopted a policy that grants will be limited to applicants who are residents of Franklin County, Massachusetts, and who plan to attend Greenfield Community College, Greenfield, Massachusetts, 01301." The final match dropped from good to poor.

How well did this applicant fair? Not very well, in the author's opinion. The applicant ended up with only three good and two fair matches out of a total 17 sources. Furthermore, many of his unique characteristics were not recognized in the sources to which he was referred. For example, this student listed the ministry as a potential career. Not one single source was provided to him which directed him towards any scholarships which might have been available to pre-ministerial, missionary or religious leadership scholarships. Most of the scholarship leads he received were for general leadership abilities or were directed at the business or the computer fields. Second, no scholarships were directed to this student that might have recognized his religious affiliation or his ethnic background. It is quite unimaginable that no scholarship leads could be found for a student who listed American Lutheran as his religious affiliation or whose ancestry was Irish and Polish. In addition no particular scholarship leads were directed to him that might have recognized his specific involvement with community organizations such as the YMCA, Boys Club or Explorer Scouts.

All in all, it does not appear this student received his money's worth. It is conceivable though, if he had been an actual student and applied for these scholarships, he might have received one. It is likely though that the student could have found on his own at least five good or fair matches had he reviewed books on scholarship programs in his local or school libraries. With twice as many poor ratings as good or fair ratings, however, the overall results that the applicant received are best described as poor.

Two other researchers/writers have come to similar conclusions about computerized scholarship services. Jane Bryant Quinn, a columnist for the *Washington Post* reported in October, 1982, similar poor results in reviewing the efforts of another computerized scholarship search organization. In addition, the October, 1982 issue of *Changing Times* magazine listed the results of their survey of several services as "disappointing." They further stated that "our applicant could have identified almost all (sources) in standard directories without an overwhelming investment of time."

It seems inevitable that computerized scholarship services will continue to fail to pay off the public's collective monetary investment. If services did stay in frequent contact with all of the organizations, update their data bases quickly, and also send out change of status letters to all applicants when they learned of such changes, their image could be improved.

Even then, however, success might breed failure, in the long run. For instance, the typical scholarship organization may not be well known outside of a district, county, or even a state. Most such organizations, with good local publicity, probably already receive more than sufficient numbers of well qualified applications. If these

organizations were to be listed by regional or national computerized scholarship firms, their mailing costs, applications to review and communications to applicants might increase so much as to make the process unwieldy. More limiting criteria and changes in administration then may follow, such as requiring particular colleges to administer the funds. Such changes had apparently happened in at least two of the 17 matches received by the applicant.

Perhaps other depersonalized happenings will occur more frequently as well. A note was received by the applicant from one of the sponsoring organizations which read "it had been the practice of the Trustees . . . to advise each applicant whether or not he/she had been awarded a scholarship. However due to the large number of applicants in recent years it will not be possible for the Trustees to do so. Accordingly you will be advised . . . only if you have been awarded a scholarship."

In spite of their overall poor track records, computerized scholarship search organizations undoubtedly will continue to thrive. This is the computer generation and people want to believe their "problems" can be solved by computer technology. This is one case though where the use of computer technology will probably never provide the optimal service that the users hope they will receive.

Scholarship applicants need to concentrate their time, energy and resources on those sources that are most likely to be productive. This includes contacting colleges directly for scholarship information, using their own personal contacts, and reviewing selective scholarship publications. Certainly if one wants to spend 40 or 60 dollars on a computerized list of scholarship sources it probably won't hurt, but will it help? Don't count on it!