

Search Internet Scholarship Databases

Internet scholarship databases can help you streamline your college money search by roping in thousands of scholarship opportunities and fencing them in one convenient scholarship corral for you to check out.

A database is really nothing more than a collection of information organized in such a way that makes it easy to search and find things. Scholarship databases, therefore, can streamline your search process by centralizing information about thousands of scholarship awards.

More often than not, however, scholarship databases are misused. This misuse occurs because most people don't understand how these databases work and aren't aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each database they are using.

Complicating the issue is the fact that more and more of these databases have sprung up, with practically every one claiming to have "the most scholarships" or the "highest dollar value of awards." As a result, it's harder than ever to figure out which databases you should spend your limited time on.

I have spent hundreds of hours examining these databases, and have interviewed dozens of scholarship database administrators, researchers, and programmers to uncover additional secrets.

So my friends, you now have two



ATTENTION STUDENTS AND PARENTS: This article is designed to work together with Ben Kaplan's *Scholarship Starter Kit* CD. If you haven't received a CD, contact your college planner or counselor, or let us know at www.ScholarshipCoach.com/needkit

choices: You can waste a lot of time with a trial-and-error approach—and make plenty of mistakes along the way—or you can read the rest of this article and let me do a lot of the introductory work for you.

A Database Primer

We can divide scholarship databases into two basic components. The first component is the information itself. The best scholarship databases contain not only the name and amount of each scholarship award, but also a general description of the scholarship; information about the scholarship provider; a list of relevant contact names, numbers, addresses, and websites; and data on eligibility requirements, application materials, entry deadlines, and the number of scholarships awarded.

The second component of a scholarship database is the search mechanism—the system that helps you find scholarship information pertinent to you, and filters out irrelevant listings.

No matter how wonderful the overall scholarship information contained in a database may be, it's of no use to you if you can't find the

scholarships that match your interests, talents, skills, background, and future plans.

To help you find what you're looking for, information specialists who compile databases try to divide scholarships into certain categories and then make it easier for you to weed through these categories.

Scholarship databases come in a variety of formats, with different bells and whistles. These days, most of the best scholarship databases are accessible on the Internet.

The most widely used scholarship databases that are accessible over the Internet tend to have one of two search mechanisms for finding relevant information: a *matching system* or a *browsing system*.

A matching system asks you to fill out a questionnaire and supply personal information (such as age, gender, GPA, organizational affiliations, and career information) relevant to scholarship eligibility.

A browsing system allows you to sift through *categories* of scholarships that might interest you (such as browsing through all scholarships for adult returning students or scholarships for those interested in the visual arts).

Browsing systems, however, give you more capabilities than you have when just reading a printed list of available scholarships; you can sort or filter the listings into broad and finer categories, allowing you to focus in on scholarships designed to recognize someone with your personal characteristics. In this system, however, you still do the matching yourself, one match at a time.

Each search mechanism has its advantages and disadvantages. The matching system saves you time by examining together, in a batch, all the information you have supplied—and then creating a list of scholarship prospects that seems to fit your profile.

The main drawback of a matching system is that you are relying on three basic assumptions:

- that the information in the database is uniformly accurate and timely for matching purposes (it generally isn't);
- that the scholarship researchers have figured out the best way to categorize the information (they usually have not);
- that the programmers who created the matching system thoroughly designed and tested a complicated set of filters and algorithms for including and excluding the right and wrong scholarship listings (wishful thinking).

In essence, because you see only the scholarship listings that the

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matching system says fit your profile, you do not know what scholarships you could be missing.

The strength of a browsing system is that it makes searching the database more transparent. Because you are visually sorting through all the listings yourself (with the aid of a computer to help you categorize the listings in useful ways), you can get a better feel for the types of scholarships contained in the database and better ensure that appropriate scholarships don't fall through the cracks.

On the flip side, all of this takes substantial time, energy, and concentration; it's easy to get confused about what categories of scholarships you've already sifted through.

Optimizing Your Search

The first thing to realize is that there are more than a dozen Internet scholarship databases available for your use—most don't cost anything to search.

A list of many of these databases and their web addresses—plus advice on how to best use each one—is included on the *Scholarship Database Tracking Form* attached to this article.

As you'll discover, these databases go by a variety of names like Fastweb, FastAid, College Answer, Scholarships 101, and Scholarship Experts, to name a few.

Keep in mind that each database uses different methods for gathering

scholarships and tends to be better at listing certain types of scholarships than others. Some databases employ students and stay-at-home moms to search the Internet and printed publications for scholarship leads. Others hire professional clipping services and librarians to research and distill the information.

Certain databases gather information from a survey or questionnaire mailed to a list of known scholarship providers. Others research new scholarships primarily by visiting scholarship-provider websites.

As a result, each database has access to different segments of the scholarship landscape—with no one database listing any more than a small percentage of the scholarships actually available. Just as you would sample many different foods in a buffet line, you want to search a wide variety of databases to better satisfy your appetite for college cash.

Furthermore, when these search databases ask you to define your personal characteristics, recognize that matching systems in databases take your choices very literally. For instance, suppose that you are skilled at playing the saxophone and indicated this on a database questionnaire. In your search results you would find scholarships directly related to the saxophone, but you might not find scholarships related to participation in band class or general musical ability.

In many cases the database matching system isn't smart enough to realize that saxophone playing is a subcategory of band and music. How do you combat this? You make sure that in addition to checking the saxophone box, you also check the band and music boxes.

Complicating the issue is the fact that you can't always select as many items on the questionnaire as you would like. (Some databases allow you to select only two or three options in a given category.) In such instances, conduct several searches in the database and vary the information contained in your questionnaire each time around.

If the design of the questionnaire doesn't allow you to easily vary your personal information, re-register for the database under a different name (and e-mail address if need be) and complete a fresh questionnaire with

new information.

Some databases ask you if you want to exclude scholarships whose deadlines have already passed. It is generally not a good idea to exclude these scholarships. Application deadlines often change, listings can be a couple of years old, and there's no guarantee that the deadlines stated in the database are correct. You also want to know what awards will be coming up again in future years.

Make sure you don't lose any information while completing online forms. Be aware that many database questionnaires need to be completed in one sitting. If you allow too much time to elapse between entries (such as leaving your computer to grab a snack) you may have to re-enter all your choices all over again.

One last bit of advice: Conduct searches very specific to your characteristics, but perform fairly generic

database searches as well (in which you specify minimal information about yourself). Specifying a lot of very specific information can cause some databases to omit widely accessible scholarship programs—the ones that most high school seniors and many undergraduates are eligible to apply for. In an ideal world this wouldn't happen, but the matching "logic" behind some databases is not always the most logical.

So there you have it: Internet scholarship databases are a great tool, as long as you know how to use them wisely. Remember, dozens of great scholarship opportunities are only a mouse click away!

The author of this article, Ben Kaplan, is the publisher of ScholarshipCoach.com and the winner of more than two dozen scholarships worth \$90,000—enough to cover virtually the entire cost of his Harvard education.



For more scholarships that fit your unique personal profile, see Ben Kaplan's **Scholarships That Totally Rock** CD-ROM series. This series includes guides for business, law, teaching, and more. www.ScholarshipCoach.com/products/totallyrock

Scholarship Database Tracking Form

This worksheet is designed to help you optimize your Internet scholarship database search. To give you an idea of what to expect from each database, we've rated the databases shown below on five important criteria:

- **CONTENT:** The range of scholarships represented in the database and the overall size of the database.
- **DETAIL:** The specificity and accuracy of scholarship information (such as eligibility requirements, deadline, etc.)
- **EASE OF USE:** An assessment of whether database searching is generally straightforward and user-friendly.
- **FIT:** Whether or not a database excludes junk listings, but doesn't omit scholarships that are just right for you.
- **FLEXIBILITY:** How easy it is to modify your search criteria to query for different types of scholarships.

For each of these five criteria, we've awarded an "A" if the database is above average, "B" if the database is average, and "C" if the database is below average. Keep in mind that these ratings are based on a snapshot in time. Databases are continually refined and improved. (Indeed, we hope some of these databases may be improved in response to our ratings.)

INTERNET SCHOLARSHIP DATABASES	
NAME AND DESCRIPTION	WEBSITE & RATINGS
<p>COLLEGE ANSWER DATABASE</p> <p>The College Answer database is one of the elder statesmen of the scholarship database world. In fact, several individuals who worked on the development of this database were later involved with some of the other databases.</p> <p>This particular database uses a matching system to help you locate appropriate scholarships. Filling out the required questionnaire takes about 20-25 minutes and involves quite a few pull-down menus and browser reloads to get at the exact numerical codes used for matching.</p>	<p>www.collegeanswer.com/paying/scholarship_search/pay_scholarship_search.jsp</p> <p>CONTENT = A DETAIL = B EASE OF USE = C FIT = A FLEXIBILITY = C</p>
<p>COLLEGE BOARD DATABASE</p> <p>Created by the College Board (the same lovable folks who administer all those standardized tests), the scholarship listings in this database are based on the College Board's <i>Annual Survey of Financial Aid Programs</i>. The online version of this database is drawn from a portion of ExPAN, a guidance software product sold directly to schools.</p> <p>The free online database includes fewer scholarship listings than many of the other scholarship databases profiled here, and the search mechanism is fairly simple and straightforward, making it a quick and easy database to use. The database is updated only annually, with the information contained in the online version presently lagging one year behind the College Board's printed directory.</p>	<p>http://apps.collegeboard.com/cbsearch_ss/welcome.jsp</p> <p>CONTENT = C DETAIL = B EASE OF USE = A FIT = B FLEXIBILITY = B</p>

FASTWEB SCHOLARSHIP DATABASE

Fastweb is easily the most "commercial" of the scholarship database websites, with consumer product offers interwoven into its scholarship results lists. The database features an easy-to-use interface, a personal user mailbox, and a regular stream of e-mail that advises the user of "new" awards (even though these are more likely awards that have been previously withheld).

Because Fastweb is one of the better known scholarship websites, the database benefits from the fact that certain scholarship administrators and sponsors take the initiative to send the latest information on their scholarships directly to Fastweb. The questionnaire used for scholarship matching is one of the lengthier ones—on the order of 20 minutes or more to fill out. Changing a profile to run multiple searches is straightforward.

FASTAID DATABASE

Created by Dan Cassidy and the National Scholarship Research Service, FastAid is a database that surfaced in the 1980s. In addition to all the standard listings that many other database sites have, FastAid is known for listing some of the more quirky scholarship awards.

The online questionnaire requires about 10 to 15 minutes to complete—a process that I found unnecessarily complicated by category selection boxes that function differently than those of other databases. My test student profiles, however, were matched fairly well. The amount of information listed for each scholarship is adequate, but I encountered a few problems with the accuracy of information contained in some of the listings.

FRESCH SCHOLARSHIP DATABASE

When using this small source database, you can employ the "Power Search" to match scholarships to your personal profile, or you can browse about 30 categories (with selected keyword searches). The latter is my preferred way. I found the Power Search feature to be problematic because of the extremely long time needed for results to be processed, web pages loaded, and the present lack of flexibility in modifying or editing my search criteria.

Although the user interface and entire website have a "homemade" feel to it, the database nevertheless includes some unusual scholarship awards that I could not find in other databases.

www.fastweb.com

CONTENT = A
DETAIL = B
EASE OF USE = B
FIT = B
FLEXIBILITY = A

www.fastaid.com

CONTENT = B
DETAIL = B
EASE OF USE = C
FIT = A
FLEXIBILITY = C

www.freschinfo.com

CONTENT = C
DETAIL = B
EASE OF USE = C
FIT = B
FLEXIBILITY = C

PETERSON'S SCHOLARSHIP SEARCH

This database is used to generate a number of Peterson's printed scholarship books and directories. The online version of the database is relatively small, and the matching questionnaire takes a modest 5-7 minutes to complete, depending on how many categories of personal information you choose to include (the database permits you to include or exclude such categories). Only very brief information for each scholarship match is presented.

Peterson's also offers a fee-based scholarship and financial aid database specifically for those looking for scholarships and tuition discounts from particular colleges.

www.petersons.com/ss/code/prompt.asp

CONTENT = C
 DETAIL = C
 EASE OF USE = B
 FIT = C
 FLEXIBILITY = B

SCHOLARSHIP RESOURCE NETWORK (SRN) DATABASE

There are two versions of the Scholarship Resource Network (SRN) database: the full database that is part of the SRN/PC software sold to schools and an abbreviated subset of this searchable database (called SRN Express) that is available online for free at the Web address shown above. Additional online versions of SRN Express have been licensed to other websites (including FinancialAid.com and AbsolutelyScholarships.com).

The strong point of this database is its detailed and complete listings on each scholarship match. The online version features two "quick search" options—by course of study and state of residency—that can come in handy. Although the Web version is fairly easy to use, the questionnaire for the online matching system does not have enough specificity for a tight fit and is difficult to save or modify.

www.srnexpress.com

CONTENT = B
 DETAIL = A
 EASE OF USE = A
 FIT = C
 FLEXIBILITY = C

SCHOLARSHIPS 101 DATABASE

As one of the Web's largest scholarship databases, the Scholarships 101 database has been licensed by dozens of websites, including Scholarships.com, Scholarships-USA.com, and GoCollege.com. (The database is also available on CD-ROM.) The strength of the Scholarships 101 database is the sheer number of its listings. The detail of each award listing, however, is only mediocre.

Be aware that one of the key drivers of search results in this database is the inclusion of a particular academic major. In the first sample search I conducted (which took about 15 minutes) I followed the site's recommendation and didn't list a potential academic major. This returned a lot of mismatched scholarship hits. When I did declare a sample major, a smaller number of more closely matched awards turned up. This result was much better, except that many of the scholarship listings open to the greatest number of students were suddenly missing.

www.scholarships101.com

CONTENT = A
 DETAIL = B
 EASE OF USE = B
 FIT = C
 FLEXIBILITY = C

WINTERGREEN/ORCHARD HOUSE SCHOLARSHIP DATABASE

The ubiquitous Wintergreen/Orchard House (WOH) database is available through licensees who use this content for their websites or print directories. In this database, a high proportion of the scholarship listings are awards with very specific and limited eligibility criteria.

Because a search mechanism does not accompany the WOH database license, the Ease of Use, Fit, and Flexibility ratings depend solely on the individual licensee.

CollegeNet, which licences the database, provides a "Mach25" browsing system in which you set a series of filters (based on age, gender, year in school, and whether to include or exclude school-specific listings), and then browse through different categories and subcategories of awards while the filters do their job. There is also a keyword search that can help you home in on the exact type of awards you are looking for.

www.collegenet.com/mach25

CONTENT = B
DETAIL = B
EASE OF USE = -
FIT = -
FLEXIBILITY = -

SCHOLARSHIP EXPERTS DATABASE

This database requires a small fee to search its basic listings (national and state scholarships) for one year. The scholarship listings in this database seem to be balanced between fairly well known scholarships and more eclectic listings, although I didn't come across lots of scholarships that I hadn't found in other databases.

The well-designed user interface for this database is what sets it apart; it includes such features as help screens, an option that allows you to choose how many years' worth of results (1-4 years in the future) you want to search for, and the ability to pick up where you stopped, if you suddenly have to log off.

The database uses a matching questionnaire that takes about 20 minutes to fill out, but the fit from the matching process was only fair, as some clearly mismatched scholarship listings surfaced. My sample results suggested that the additional fee charged for "premium" access to local and institutional awards would not benefit very many searchers at present.

www.scholarshipexperts.com

CONTENT = B
DETAIL = A
EASE OF USE = A
FIT = B
FLEXIBILITY = A

DATABASE SEARCH NOTES

Below are spaces for you to record each entry or selection you make when using each scholarship database. To guarantee your search will produce maximum results, I recommend performing multiple searches in each database, varying the information you supply each time around.

DATABASE NAME:

User Name: _____

Password: _____

Password Hint Question: _____

Password Hint Question Response: _____

Selected Age or Date of Birth: _____

Selected Year in School: _____

Selected Extracurricular Activities:

Selected Aspirations and Career Goals:

Selected Personal Characteristics:

Selected College Major(s):

Other Selected Search Criteria:

ADDITIONAL NOTES: