

Survey Concerning the Use of Web Search Sites and Social Media Sites for Evaluating Scholarship Applicants

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fastweb and the National Scholarship Providers Association (NSPA) conducted a survey of the NSPA membership in September 2011 to understand the extent to which scholarship providers use the web and social media to evaluate scholarship applicants. NSPA has more than 300 members who collectively award more than \$1 billion in scholarships each year. About a quarter of the NSPA members responded to the survey.

The survey results included the following key findings:

- About a quarter of scholarship providers used web search sites like Google and/or social media web sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter to search for online information about scholarship applicants.
- Most of the scholarship providers screen only finalists due to a lack of resources to screen all applicants.
- Three quarters of the scholarship providers who reviewed an applicant's online presence were looking for one or more red flags, mostly for signs that the scholarship applicant might reflect badly on the scholarship sponsor. They wanted to see whether the applicant demonstrates good judgment, and were looking for provocative or inappropriate photographs or remarks, illegal activities (underage drinking and use of narcotics), insensitive or discriminatory remarks or a negative attitude.
- More than half of the scholarship providers review an applicant's online presence to get to know the applicant better, to look for creativity and other positive personality traits or to evaluate real-life communication skills.
- A quarter of scholarship providers who reviewed an applicant's online presence did so to identify or resolve conflicting information about the applicant, such as lies about qualifications listed on the application.
- A third of scholarship providers who reviewed an applicant's online presence have denied an applicant a scholarship and a quarter have granted an applicant a scholarship because of information they found out about them online.

This demonstrates that a student's online presence is a two-edged sword that can hurt or help the student's chances of winning a scholarship.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP APPLICANTS

A student's online appearance can help or hurt their chances of winning a scholarship. All else being equal, scholarship providers will pick a finalist with the more professional and polite online presence. They want to pick winners who will reflect well on their organization.

Students need to know that anything they post online may be visible to others, not just their friends. It is sometimes difficult to delete posts, so youthful indiscretions may hurt them in the future. An online presence can lead to fame and fandom, but it can also create a bad impression.

Here are some tips for developing a professional online presence:

1. Use an appropriate email address, such as firstname.lastname@gmail.com. Do not use offensive or sexually suggestive email addresses.
2. Google your name and review at least the first ten pages of search results for inappropriate material. Correct any problems, if possible.
3. Review your Facebook account, removing inappropriate and immature material and anything that may be misinterpreted. Remove pictures or videos that show illegal or questionable behavior. Avoid using profanity. Delete questionable posts by others on your wall. Ask an adult, such as a parent, to review your Facebook page to help you identify problematic material.
4. Think twice before posting anything offensive, illegal or otherwise inappropriate.

In addition to scholarship providers, college admissions staff and employers are starting to review the online presence of candidates, so it may affect whether you get in or get a job offer.

DETAILED SURVEY RESULTS

About a Quarter of Scholarship Providers Screen Applicants Online Presence

Almost one-fifth of scholarship providers (18%) said that they use web search sites like Google to search for online information about scholarship applicants. Some said that they only use web search sites for reviewing applicants who reach the finalist stage, since they do not have the staff and volunteer resources to screen all applicants. Some who said that they did not use the web to screen applicants expressed an interest in doing so in the future.

Almost one-fifth of scholarship providers (18%) said that they use social media web sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to look for online information about scholarship applicants. Some said that they use social media sites when trying to decide between two equally qualified applicants or to resolve conflicting information about an applicant.

About 12% of scholarship providers said that they use both web search sites and social media web sites to screen scholarship applicants, so about a quarter of scholarship providers used either web search sites or social media web sites to screen scholarship applicants.

Of the scholarship providers who use social media web sites to screen applicants, almost all (92%) use Facebook and a quarter use LinkedIn or YouTube. Less than a tenth (8%) use Twitter.

Of the scholarship providers who use web search sites and social media web sites to screen applicants, almost all (92%) screen just finalists. Less than a tenth (8%) screen all applicants.

One scholarship provider said that they use a double-blind reviewing process for evaluating candidates solely based on the information supplied in the scholarship application, so it would not be possible to screen applicants using web search sites or social media web sites.

Only one scholarship provider used a third-party service to screen applicants for inappropriate online behavior.

A few survey respondents said that they hadn't thought about screening scholarship applicants and finalists before receiving the survey, but they like the idea and will be discussing it with their scholarship committees.

Scholarship Providers Look for Both Positive and Negative Information

When reviewing a scholarship applicant's online presence, the scholarship providers look for the following information:

- To determine whether the applicant demonstrates good judgment (58%)
- Provocative or inappropriate photographs or remarks (58%)
- Illegal activities, such as underage drinking and use of narcotics (50%)
- To get to know the applicant better (42%)
- Insensitive or discriminatory remarks (42%)
- Negative attitude (42%)
- To look for creativity and other positive personality traits (25%)
- Lies about qualifications listed on application (25%)
- To evaluate real-life communication skills (17%)

Of the scholarship providers who review an applicant's online presence, three quarters were looking for negative information and more than half were looking for positive information.

One scholarship provider who awards scholarships based in part on financial need used online search tools to verify financial information, such as determining whether the value of a home is consistent with a low-income applicant.

Another scholarship provider said that it is "a good way to get to know the student and hear his/her voice on topics."

An Applicant's Online Presence Can Affect Whether the Applicant Wins a Scholarship

A third of scholarship providers who screen the online presence of scholarship applicants (6% of respondents) have denied an applicant a scholarship because of information they found out about them online. One scholarship provider said that some of their donor funds require them to deny scholarships to finalists who have engaged in criminal activity. Other scholarship providers said that the screening of an applicant's online presence has not yet identified any red flags that weren't already identified in the required letters of recommendation.

A quarter of scholarship providers who screen the online presence of scholarship applicants (4% of respondents) have selected an applicant because of information they found out about them online.

One scholarship provider said that social media can help complete their database of applicant information, such as information that is missing from the scholarship application.