The present invention relates to methods and systems for funding a college education by accumulating and managing merchant rebates. The present invention also relates to methods and systems for enrolling and registering members in an organization through the organization provision of topical information and materials, useful links to, and information on, Internet and non-Internet based merchants, related to a college education. In particular, the present invention relates to facilitating retail transactions between an organization registered members and selected merchants who offer rebates on the transactions between themselves and the organization members so that the rebates are accumulated and provided for funding a college education.

26 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets
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FIGURE 1

Rebate Network Manager
100

Money Manager
110

115

Student Loan Payment Account 120
Educational IRA 130
Higher Education Savings Account 140
Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150
State 529 Savings Account 160
FIGURE 3

Full Member On-line Privileges / Services / Links 300

Select 305

Original Content Pages 310

Participating Merchant Web Site Links / Pages 315

Select 320

Off-line Merchant Information Lists 322

Select 335

Educational Focused Search Engine 330

Select 336

Admissions Materials / Virtual College Tours 340

Select 345

Selected Educational / Topical Web Sites 325

Select 365

Financial Aid / Scholarship Information 360

Select 355

Alumni Sites 350

Select 356

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FIGURE 4

TuitionFund.com Member with Valid Registered Credit Card On-line Access

TuitionFund.com Web Site

Select

On-line Merchants Registered w/ RNM

Money Manager

Member's Rebate Account(s)

Rebate Network Manager "RNM"

On-line Merchants Registered w/ RNM
FIGURE 5

TuitionFund.com Member With Valid Registered Credit Card On-line Access 500

TuitionFund.com Web Site 510

Select 515

On-line Merchants Registered With a Tracking Entity, But Not w/ a "RNM" 520

Money Manager 540

Rebate Network Manager ("RNM") 530

Tracking Entity 525

Member's Rebate Account(s) 550
FIGURE 6

TuitionFund.com Member With Valid Registered Credit Card – Off line 600

Select 615

Point-of-Sale Merchants Registered With a "RNM" 620

TuitionFund.com Web Site /or/ TuitionFund.com 610

Money Manager 650

Rebate Network Manager ("RNM") 640

Member's Rebate Account(s) 660

Tracking Entity 630

Money Manager
METHODS AND SYSTEMS FOR PROVIDING A REBATE PROGRAM

This application is a continuation of application Ser. No. 09/703,562 filed on Nov. 1, 2000 which claims priority to provisional application Ser. No. 60/208,727, filed Jun. 2, 2000.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to methods and systems for funding a higher education by accumulating and managing merchant rebates.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The dramatically increasing costs of higher education have unfortunately put the benefits of a higher education out of the reach of many people. However, the value of higher education has never been more evident. For example, in today’s technology driven economies many job opportunities require advanced scientific and technical training. Indeed, a recent study conducted by the U.S. Labor Department estimated that in the year 2000, 85% of the nation’s jobs will require education or training above the high school level. Moreover, as international commercial, political, and cultural ties continue to deepen in the present atmosphere of globalization, the benefits of a well rounded education become ever more apparent.

Individuals with post-secondary degrees typically receive higher salaries than those individuals without such degrees. According to a recent study conducted by the College Board, the lifetime earnings of individuals with a bachelor’s degree are 51% higher than those with only a high school diploma. Similarly, the average annual salary for a college graduate is currently $59,048, compared with $33,779 for those individuals with only a high school diploma.

Although, Americans consistently rank the ability to pay for their child’s college education as one of their primary concerns, the average debt load carried by recent college graduates continues to soar each year. According to Provident Mutual.com, 87% of current students say that college costs will soon be “out of reach,” 52% say that any additional debt will put them in serious risk, and 38% say that college is “not affordable” right now. Thus, while higher education is emerging as a critical factor to future success in the job market, the financial burden of obtaining a degree is rising dramatically.

A study by the College Board determined that the current average price (tuition plus room and board) of one year at a private four-year university was $20,273 for the 1998-1999 school year. For the same time period at a public post-secondary institution, the price was $7,773. Recent college-cost increases have easily outpaced the U.S. economy’s overall inflation rate in the past ten years, and the National College Resource Association estimates that by the year 2000, one year at a private four year university will cost $61,251, while one year at a public institution will be $28,787.

For today’s newborn, experts estimate that parents must save approximately $216 per month for 18 years to cover the entire four year tuition costs at a public institution. In 1997, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the median income for a four-person family was $53,350, indicating that college saving for two children would require 10% of pre-tax income for a four-person family.

For families unable to save sufficient funds for college expenses, student borrowing has emerged as the next best solution. The current level of college borrowing in the United States is approaching $40 billion. Student borrowing in the last five years has exceeded the growth rate of college costs by three times and personal income by four times. According to ProvidentMutual.com, two-thirds of borrowers claim that their student loans represent a “major financial hardship.”

As a result of the increasing costs associated with higher education, in the last five years there has been a proliferation of government sponsored and private programs designed to help parents save for their children’s college education. Recognition of the financial hardships related to saving or borrowing for college has led many families to seek solutions to the problem, which in turn has created an emerging industry of college savings options. State created tuition savings plans are currently available in forty-six states, and in less than five years have amassed in excess of $7 billion in invested assets. The federal government has also created “Educational IRA’s” and other tax incentives related to education investments. Most major brokerage firms and mutual funds now market programs designed to encourage parents to save for college expenses, and have been extremely successful in attracting investors.

Some drawbacks of these tuition savings programs include obligatory contributions, large amounts of after tax income needed to fund the programs, limitations on school selection offered to the student, restrictions on the funds at maturation, and the potential of program cancellations without guarantee of admittance. Since most state plans require contributors to sign binding contracts that lock in a payment schedule, such plans therefore obligate contributors, and require them to make a special effort to make payments. Moreover, the various private tuition savings programs also require contributors to make special financial sacrifices to save for tuition costs.

What is needed are methods and systems for accumulating monies for funding a college tuition that do not place a significant financial burden on the user.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

The following figures form part of the present specification and are included to further demonstrate certain aspects and embodiments of the present invention. The invention may be better understood by reference to one or more of these figures in combination with the detailed description of specific embodiments presented herein.

FIG. 1 illustrates the various funds and accounts available to registered members for holding member rebates.

FIG. 2 provides an overview of the registered member and non-registered user access to the TuitionFund.com Web Site.

FIG. 3 provides an overview of the privileges, services, and links available to registered members.

FIG. 4 provides an overview of one merchant rebate sales embodiment.

FIG. 5 provides an overview of one merchant rebate sales embodiment.

FIG. 6 provides an overview of one merchant rebate sales embodiment.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to methods and systems for funding a higher education by accumulating and managing merchant rebates.

In some embodiments, the present invention provides a method comprising: a) providing: i) a member, ii) at least one merchant rebates; a) at least one higher education account, and iii) at least one merchant offering a rebate; b) calculating a rebate on purchases made by the member from at least one merchant; and c) crediting said at
the merchant and credits the higher education account.

In further embodiments, the rebate network manager tracks the purchases by correlating a registered credit number with said purchases.

In further embodiments, the present invention provides a system comprising a memory device and a processor in communication with the memory device, the processor configured to receive a credit from a rebate network manager and place the credit in a higher education account stored in the memory device.

DEFINITIONS

To facilitate understanding of the invention, a number of terms and phrases are defined below:

As used herein, the term "higher education account" refers to a financial account that is used to fund or pay for post-high school (i.e., post-secondary) education or contribute to a higher education institution (e.g., college, university, or trade school). Examples of higher education accounts include, but are not limited to, student loan payment accounts, educational IRAs, college fund savings accounts, college charitable contribution accounts, and educational accounts, including, but not limited to, student loan payment accounts, educational IRAs, college fund savings accounts, and college charitable contribution accounts.

As used herein, the term "money manager" refers to a professional financial management group. It is contemplated that, examples of "money managers" include, but are not limited to, organizations such as Charles Schwab, Fidelity, American Express, and Merrill Lynch.

As used herein, the term "rebate network manager" refers to an entity (e.g., InfoSpace) that correlates purchases made from merchants belonging to a network with rebates offered in conjunction with the purchases. In some cases, the "rebate network manager" debits a merchant account and credits an existing account (e.g., higher education account).

As used herein, the term "tracking entity" refers to an entity (e.g., Linkshare.com or Befree.com) that tracks and records purchases made by a consumer from merchants associated with a tracking entity.

As used herein, the term "online," when used in relation to a merchant, refers to a web page or collection of web pages (e.g., a web site) where goods or services are for sale.

As used herein, the terms "on-site" and "point of sale," when used in relation to a merchant site, refers to a physical place of business where goods and services are offered for sale.

As used herein, the term "processor" refers to a device that performs a set of steps according to a program.

As used herein, the term "computer memory device" refers to any data storage device that is readable by a computer, including, but not limited to, hard disks, magnetic (floppy) disks, compact discs, zip drives, and magnetic tape.

As used herein, the term "rebate" refers to a return of part of a payment.

As used herein, the term "client-server" refers to a model of interaction in a distributed system in which a program at one site sends a request to a program at another site and waits for a response. The requesting program is called the "client," and the program which responds to the request is called the "server." In the context of the World Wide Web (discussed below), the client is a "Web browser" (or simply "browser") which runs on a computer of a user; the program which
responds to browser requests by serving Web pages is commonly referred to as a "Web server."

As used herein, the term "hyperlink" refers to a navigational link from one document to another, or from one portion (or component) of a document to another. Typically, a hyperlink is displayed as a highlighted word or phrase that can be selected by clicking on it using a mouse to jump to the associated document or documented portion.

As used herein, the term "hypertext system" refers to a computer-based informational system in which documents (and possibly other types of data entities) are linked together via hyperlinks to form a user-navigable "web."

As used herein, the term "Internet" refers to a collection of interconnected (public and/or private) networks that are linked together by a set of standard protocols (such as TCP/IP and HTTP) to form a global, distributed network. While this term is intended to refer to what is now commonly known as the Internet, it is also intended to encompass variations which may be made in the future, including changes and additions to existing standard protocols.

As used herein, the terms "World Wide Web" or "Web" refer generally to both (i) a distributed collection of interconnected, user-viewable hypertext documents (commonly referred to as Web documents or Web pages) that are accessible via the Internet, and (ii) the client and server software components which provide user access to such documents using standardized Internet protocols. Currently, the primary standard protocol for allowing applications to locate and acquire Web documents is HTTP, and the Web pages are encoded using HTML. However, the terms "Web" and "World Wide Web" are intended to encompass future markup languages and transport protocols which may be used in place of (or in addition to) HTML and HTTP.

As used herein, the term "web site" refers to a computer system that serves informational content over a network using the standard protocols of the World Wide Web. Typically, a Web site corresponds to a particular Internet domain name, such as "TuitionFund.com" and includes the content associated with a particular organization. As used herein, the term is generally intended to encompass both (i) the hardware/software server components that serve the informational content over the network, and (ii) the "back end" hardware/software components, including any non-standard or specialized components, that interact with the server components to perform services for Web site users.

As used herein, the term "HTML" refers to HyperText Markup Language which is a standard coding convention and set of codes for attaching presentation and linking attributes to informational content within documents. During a document authoring stage, the HTML codes (referred to as "tags") are embedded within the informational content of the document. When the Web document (or HTML document) is subsequently transferred from a Web server to a browser, the codes are interpreted by the browser and used to parse and display the document. Additionally in specifying how the Web browser is to display the document, HTML tags can be used to create links to other Web documents (commonly referred to as "hyperlinks").

As used herein, the term "HTTP" refers to HyperText Transport Protocol which is the standard World Wide Web client-server protocol used for the exchange of information (such as HTML documents, and client requests for such documents) between a browser and a Web server. HTTP includes a number of different types of messages which can be sent from the client to the server to request different types of server actions. For example, a "GET" message, which has the format GET, causes the server to return the document or file located at the specified URL.

As used herein, the term "URL" refers to Uniform Resource Locator which is a unique address which fully specifies the location of a file or other resource on the Internet. The general format of a URL is protocol://machine address: port/path/filename. The port specification is optional, and if none is entered by the user, the browser defaults to the standard port for whatever service is specified as the protocol. For example, if HTTP is specified as the protocol, the browser will use the HTTP default port of 80.

As used herein, the term "cookies" refers to a technology that enables a Web server to retrieve information from a user's computer that reveals prior browsing activities of the user. The informational item stored on the user's computer (typically on the hard drive) is commonly referred to as a "cookie."

Many standard Web browsers support the use of cookies.

As used herein, the term "PUSH technology" refers to an information dissemination technology used to send data to users over a network. In contrast to the World Wide Web (a "pull" technology), in which the client browser must request a Web page before it is sent, PUSH protocols send the informational content to the user computer automatically, typically based on information pre-specified by the user.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention utilizes certain aspects of the World Wide Web to help pay for or fund higher education or to allow charitable contributions to higher education institutions. Methods and systems are provided for generating funds for these uses through a rebate network. These methods and systems are described in more detail below in the following sections: I) Overview of The Types of Members’ Funds and Accounts; II) Overview of Existing Registered Member Login and New Member Registration; III) Overview of the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links; and IV) Preferred Merchant/Merchant Rebate Sales Schemes [A. On-line Merchants Associated with the Rebate Network Manager; B. Merchant Not Registered with a Rebate Network Manager, but Associated with a Tracking Entity; and C. Off-line Merchants]. The methods and systems according to the present invention will be described with reference to FIGS. 1-110.

1. Overview of the Types of Members’ Funds and Accounts

FIG. 1 is a flow chart illustrating the flow of member rebate monies due a member from purchases consummated through participating on-line or point of sale merchants. In a preferred embodiment, the rebate monies earned by a member by participating in the TuitionFund.com program are centrally accumulated by a Rebate Network Manager 100. The rebate monies earned by the member are then directed to a professional Money Manager 110. The professional Money Manager 110 may be a licensed financial advisor, broker, or any firm offering financial management and brokerage services. Examples of contemplated Money Managers 110 might include, but are not limited to, the following firms offering financial services: American Express, Charles Schwab, Fidelity, or Merrill Lynch. The Money Manager 110 allocates the rebate monies earned by a particular member according to the desires of that member.

In preferred embodiments, any interest, dividends, stock splits, or the like earned by the member on any of a member’s various investment fund and account options available 115 are reinvested according to the to the member’s desires in any of the member’s various investment fund and account options 115, as allowed by law. In certain other embodiments, any
investment principal, interest, dividends, stock splits, or the
like, earned by the member on any of a member’s various
investment fund and account options 115 are disbursed
directly to member’s higher education creditors. In still fur-
ther embodiments, any investment principal, interest, divi-
dends, stock splits, or the like, earned by the member on any
of a member’s various investment fund and account options
115 are disbursed directly to the member earning such accre-
tions, as allowed by law. In yet other embodiments, any
investment principal, interest, dividends, stock splits, or the
like, earned by the member on any of a member’s various
funds and accounts 115, are disbursed to another member’s or
other members’ various funds and accounts 115.

In some preferred embodiments, as allowed by law, a mem-
ber may elect to fund or partially fund any of the various
investment fund and account options 115 available with mon-
ies other than those obtained by rebates from participating
merchants. Similarly, in other preferred embodiments, a non-
member may elect to fund or partially fund any of the various
investment fund and account options 115 available to mem-
bers.

In preferred embodiments, members may select from a
number of available member investment fund and account
options 120, 130, 140, 150, and 160 established for funding a
higher education. In preferred embodiments, information,
including balances, concerning the various member invest-
ment fund and account options 115 is stored or recorded in
computer readable form in various data storage devices.
Examples of data storage devices for storing and recording
member fund and account information include, but are not
limited to, magnetic media including, disks, tapes, and the
like, optical storage media including, compact disk (CD)
format, digital video disk (DVD) format, or the like, a pro-
cessing device’s random access memory (RAM), or a pro-
cessing device’s read only memory (ROM), etc. The present
invention also contemplates that member investment fund
and account options 115 balances and interest earned infor-
mation will be provided and/or accessible regularly and per-
iodically to each individual member. The present invention
also contemplates providing periodic and regular member
investment fund and account 115 balance and interest earned
information to all entitled government and financial agencies,
higher education creditors, and educational institutions as
required by law. In some embodiments, member investment
fund and account options 115 balance and interest earned
information will be provided to the recipient by any accept-
able manner, (e.g., electronic mail, computer readable data,
type-written or printed, etc.).

The present invention contemplates that the members’
accumulated rebate monies held in their various investment
fund and account options 115 be disbursed to the member’s
various higher education creditors. Similarly, the present
invention also contemplates that member funds can be dis-
tributed directly to an institution or institutions of higher
education.

In still other embodiments, the member may specify that an
amount from their accumulated earned rebate monies in their
various investment fund and account options 115 be dis-
bursed for the benefit of another’s higher education. Accord-
ingly, in some particular embodiments, a member may have
one or more other members contributing earned rebate mon-
ies to their funds and accounts 115. Thus, the invention con-
templates that some members may earn rebate monies either
exclusively or partially for the benefit of another member’s
various investment fund and account options 115.

In certain embodiments, the various investment options
available to the member 115 may include Student Loan Pay-
mount Accounts 120. The present invention contemplates that
available funds and accounts under the Student Loan Pay-
ment Account 120 option may comprise interest bearing
annuities, mutual funds, bond funds, index funds, money
market accounts, or any other investment grade security or
equity, and the like. In preferred embodiments, member
rebate monies accumulating in the available funds and
accounts under the Student Loan Payment Account 120
option are managed by the professional Money Manager 110
on an on-going basis.

In particularly preferred embodiments, member rebate
monies accumulated in the various available funds and
accounts of the Student Loan Payment Account 120 are dis-
bursed directly by the Money Manager 110 to the member’s
various higher education creditors. The present invention,
however, is not limited by the nature of the member’s higher
education creditors. Indeed, the present invention contem-
plates, that the member may be indebted for higher educa-
tional expenses to banks and other financial institutions, com-
mercial loan companies, various state and federal
government lending agencies, and private organizations. In
particular, the present invention contemplates that the higher
educational expenses owed by members may comprise
expenses for tuition and fees, room and board, and any other
expenses incidental to obtaining a higher education. The
present invention also contemplates that member rebate
monies held in member Student Loan Payment Accounts 120
may be used by the member to pay down existing higher education
loans and debts. Additionally, the present invention contem-
plates the use of member funds to pay-down the interest that
is accumulating while student loan payments are deferred
(i.e., before graduation).

In certain other embodiments, the various investment fund
and account options 115 available to the member may include
Educational IRAs 130. The present invention contemplates
that available funds and accounts under the Educational IRAs
130 option may comprise interest bearing mutual funds, bond
funds, index funds, money market accounts, or any other
investment grade security or equity allowable by law. In pref-
ered embodiments, the member Education IRAs 130 are
managed by the professional Money Manager 110. In par-
ticularly preferred embodiments, when the member Educa-
tional IRAs 130 are managed by a professional Money Man-
ger 110, the Money Manager 110 will provide the member
with appropriate guidance and oversight of each member
Educational IRAs 130 and additionally be able to provide all
relevant accountings. In still other preferred embodiments,
the Money Manager 110 managing the member’s rebate
monies accumulated in the funds and accounts of the mem-
ber’s Educational IRAs 130, will make the necessary dis-
bursements to higher educational institutions, and other
higher education creditors of the member.

In still other embodiments, a member may elect from the
various investment funds and account options available 115
to have the Money Manager 110 direct their earned rebate
monies into a Higher Education Savings Fund 140. The
present invention contemplates that the monies directed into
a member’s Higher Education Savings Fund 140 may be held
in a number of various funds and accounts. In some embodi-
ments, the various investment fund and account options
that may comprise a member Higher Education Savings Fund 140
include money market accounts, regular savings accounts,
bond funds, stock index funds, mutual funds, annuities, and
any other investment grade security or equity, as allowed by
law. In preferred embodiments, the Money Manager 110
manages and advises the member on investment strategies
and opportunities available to the member for accumulating
interest on their Higher Education Savings Accounts 140. In particularly preferred embodiments, the Money Manager 110 may directly disburse monies regularly and periodically from the member’s various funds and accounts comprising their Higher Education Savings Account 140 to the member’s higher education creditors. As seen above, the present invention is not limited by the nature of the member’s higher education creditors, nor by the nature of the member’s debt to a particular higher education creditor. In still other embodiments, the monies accumulated in the funds and accounts of the member’s Higher Education Savings Accounts 140 are allowed to accrue for a period of time until they are disbursed.

In additional embodiments, a member may elect from the various investment funds and account options 115 to have the Money Manager 110 direct their earned rebate monies into a Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150. In some embodiments, the various funds and accounts that may comprise a member Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 include money market accounts, regular savings accounts, bond funds, stock index funds, mutual funds, annuities, and any other investment grade security or equity, as allowed by law. In a preferred embodiment, a professional Money Manager 110 manages the monies directed into the various funds and accounts of a member’s Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150. In a particular embodiment, the member’s earned rebate monies directed to the funds and accounts available under the Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 are held without commingling with those monies of other members held for like purposes. However, in other preferred embodiments, an individual member’s earned rebate monies held in the various investment fund and account options under a Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 are aggregated with those of other member’s electing to direct their earned rebate monies into Higher Education Charitable Donations Accounts 150.

In particularly preferred embodiments, the monies accumulated in the various funds and accounts options available under Higher Education Charitable Donations Accounts 150 are disbursed regularly or periodically to one or more institutions of higher education. The present invention contemplates that such disbursements to institutions of higher education may occur periodically every month to every 12 months or longer. In other embodiments, the disbursements of monies held in the various funds and accounts available under Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 are made when the monies accrete to a predetermined amount. Alternatively, the disbursements of monies held in the various funds and accounts available under Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 may occur at the behest of the beneficiary institution of higher education. Moreover, the present invention contemplates that disbursements made from a fund or account held under the Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 may include interest and principal in any ratio or amount.

In still other embodiments, a member may elect from the various investment funds and account options available 115 to have the Money Manager 110 direct their earned rebate monies into a State 529 Savings Account 160. The present invention contemplates that the monies directed into a member’s State 529 Savings Account 160 may be held in a number of various funds and accounts as allowed by law. In preferred embodiments, the professional Money Manager 110 directly disburses the funds that are deposited into a member’s State 529 Savings Account 160. In still other preferred embodiments, the Money Manager 110 provides periodic investment advice and management services over the member’s State 529 Savings Account 160 monies such that the accumulated monies accrete in value.

Overview of Existing Registered Member Login and New Member Registration

FIG. 2 is a flow chart briefly illustrating the options available to both registered members and un-registered users accessing the TuitionFund.com Web Site (See FIG. 2, at 210). In particular, FIG. 2 briefly illustrates certain embodiments of the present invention highlighting the options available to existing registered members, and those wishing to become registered members, as well as those simply browsing the Web Site.

The present invention contemplates that Internet Access 205 to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210 can be established through any number of methods for connecting to the Internet and visiting a Web site. For example, Internet Access 205 can be achieved through an On-Line Service Provider 201 (e.g., America On Line [AOL], or CompuServe), through an Internet Access/Service Provider 202 (e.g., AT&T Worldnet, Earthlink, or Mindspring), or alternatively through an Internet Access 203. Once a communications link to the Web has been established, the user may then proceed to their chosen Internet Browser 205 (e.g., Netscape Navigator, or Microsoft, Internet Explorer) in order to access or “visit” the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210. The present invention is not limited by the means employed to establish a connection to the Internet, nor by the particular device used to establish the connection.

In preferred embodiments, after accessing the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210, the individual is presented with a number of available services and options offered on the Web Site 210. Thus, the user must Select 215 from the available service and options available at the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210. In some embodiments, the user, if an Existing Registered Member 220, may chose to immediately login and proceed to the Full Member On-Line Privileges/Services/Links 290 pages. Alternatively, in some other embodiments, the user, if an Existing Registered Member 220, may proceed to the Existing Member Account & Personal Information Editor 265. In preferred embodiments, Existing Registered Members 220, may alter their existing member profiles, credit or debit card account information, or make inquiries/ transfers/disbursements from their various rebate accounts and funds (See FIG. 1, at 115) in the Existing Member Account & Personal Information Editor 265. One skilled in the art will appreciate the security and confidentiality safeguards necessary for the safe operation of this area of the present invention, as well as the overall operation of the methods and systems of the present invention.

In other embodiments, the user, if not previously registered, may Select 215 to proceed to New Member Registration 230. The present invention contemplates that New Member Registration 230 may involve providing certain member identifying information to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210. For example, the new member may be required to proceed to a Member Credit Card Registration 240 page. At the Member Credit Card Registration 240 page, the new member can specify the account numbers they wish to have charged for their various on-line purchases at the full member On-line Privileges/Services/Links 290 pages. The member may also desire to register other accounts for their off-line purchase, or use the same accounts. In preferred embodiments, members can register their e.g., credit cards, debit cards, checking account numbers, etc. Registration information may be saved
in computer readable memory at the TuitionFund.com Web Site or at another data storage point (e.g., the Rebate Network Manager) or both. Moreover, the present invention contemplates that information required during New Member Registration may be further transmitted to other entities involved in awarding member rebates, or for other purposes (See e.g., Rebate Network Manager [FIG. 1, at 100], or Money Manager [FIG. 1, at 110]). In other preferred embodiments, the point of New Member Registration may further comprise selecting from the various investment account and funds options available for depositing the rebate monies earned as a TuitionFund.com member (See, FIG. 1, at 115). Accordingly, the Member Registration page may provide any information necessary for selecting from the funds and account options available to registered members (See, FIG. 1, at 115). Once the previously unregistered user becomes a registered member, they may proceed directly to the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links pages.

In other embodiments, after accessing the TuitionFund.com Web Site and when faced with Selecting desired pages or links, the user may proceed directly to Selected On-line Content Pages/Services/Links. In particular, the present invention contemplates that the Selected Educational/Topical Web Site area of interest and proceeds to visit that merchant’s web page. For example, the new member may be required to proceed to a Member Credit Card Registration page. At the Member Credit Card Registration page, the new member can specify the account numbers they wish to use for their various on-line purchases. In preferred embodiments, after accessing the TuitionFund.com Web Site and when faced with Selecting desired pages or links, the user may proceed directly to Selected On-line Content Pages/Services/Links. In other preferred embodiments, the user, if not previously registered, may Select to proceed to New Member Registration. The present invention contemplates that New Member Registration may involve providing certain member identification information to the TuitionFund.com Web Site. For example, the new member may need to provide the TuitionFund.com Web Site with information necessary for selecting from the funds and account options available to registered members. The present invention contemplates that information required during New Member Registration may be further transmitted to other entities involved in awarding member rebates, or for other purposes (See e.g., Rebate Network Manager [FIG. 1, at 100], or Money Manager [FIG. 1, at 110]). In other preferred embodiments, the point of New Member Registration may further comprise selecting from the various investment account and fund options available for depositing the rebate monies earned as a TuitionFund.com member (See, FIG. 1, at 115). Accordingly, the Member Credit Card Registration page may provide any information necessary for selecting from the investment fund and account options available to registered members (See, FIG. 1, at 115). Once the previously unregistered user becomes a registered member, they may proceed to the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links pages.

In some embodiments, nonmembers may have access to all features and services, including links to merchants, as registered members, except that nonmembers will not earn rebates on their purchases.

Overview of the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links

FIG. 3 is a flow chart briefly illustrating a number of the various options available to registered members after login to the TuitionFund.com Web Site in preferred embodiments (See FIG. 2, at 210). Once a registered member accesses the TuitionFund.com Web Site (See FIG. 2, at 210) and proceeds through the sequence of events for member login, the member may then browse through the content pages, links, and services that comprise the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links pages and thus, Select content pages, links, or services of interest. In some embodiments, the registered member may Select to proceed to the Web Site’s Original Content Pages. In some preferred embodiments, the Original Content Pages may comprise articles of interest to those in the field of higher education. Further, the present invention contemplates that the articles of interest in the Original Content Pages may comprise essays, news articles, topical discussions, instructive content, surveys, informative pieces, or monographs, authored by individuals and organizations involved in higher education.

In alternative embodiments, the registered member may Select to proceed to any one or more of a number of links to Participating Merchant Web Sites that offer rebates to registered members. Thus, the registered member then Selects a particular participating Merchant Web Site of interest and proceeds to visit that merchant’s page. In particularly preferred embodiments, the links to Participating Merchant Web Sites are categorized into sites with similar or related content. Alternatively, the registered member may Select to view (i.e., browse) pages of Off-line Merchant Information Lists in their area that offer members rebates. The Off-line Merchant Information Lists may similarly be categorized into merchants with similar or related content in a given defined local.

In some embodiments, the registered member may Select to proceed to the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area of the TuitionFund.com Web Site. The present invention contemplates that the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area may comprise links and pages of interest to those interested in all aspects of education, and particularly higher education. Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area topics include, but are not limited to, an Educational Focused Search Engine, Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours, Alumni Web Sites, and Financial Aid/Scholarship Information, etc.
Focused Search Engine 330 may Select 335 to proceed to Participating Merchant Web Sites 315.

In other embodiments of the present invention, the registered member may proceed from the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325 to the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340. In preferred embodiments, Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 may comprise pages posted directly to the TuitionFund.com Web Site by various institutions of higher education, or alternatively, may comprise links to such pages. In some embodiments, the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 may comprise multimedia presentations or links to multimedia presentations from various institutions of higher education. In other embodiments, various institutions of higher education may post electronic admissions forms on the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 or links to such forms. The present invention also contemplates that the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 may comprise informative, topical, or entertaining pages posted by various institutions of higher education or links to such pages. Registered members entering the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 will thus Select 345 from these and other highlighted options to before proceeding one or more Pages 346 of interest.

In still other embodiments, the registered user may proceed from the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325 to various Alumni Web Sites 350 links and pages. The registered member may Select 355 to proceed to any one or more of a number of links and Pages 356 in this area. Examples of Pages 356 in this area include, but are not limited to, links and pages offering special alumni organization offers and incentives, information and links to the athletics programs at the various institutions, information or links on alumni networking and career development resources, and message, bulletin-boards, or chat groups for alumni, etc.

In yet other embodiments, a link to Financial Aid/Scholarship Information 360 links and pages may be provided from the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325. In preferred embodiments, the Financial Aid/Scholarship Information 360 links and pages may comprise topical articles, financial tools and calculators, as well as information provided by state and federal government agencies, and private and institutional higher education lenders. In other preferred embodiments, the various institutions of higher education may provide links and pages concerning their particular financial aid policies and scholarship opportunities. Additionally, in other embodiments, private charitable institutions may provide information or their various aid and scholarship opportunities.

The above-mentioned embodiments of the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links 300 are merely representative of several specific embodiments that comprise the present invention; other embodiments relative to higher education will be evident to those skilled in the art.

Preferred Merchant/Member Rebate Sales Schemes

II. On-Line Merchants Registered with a Rebate Network Manager

FIG. 4 is a flow chart that briefly illustrates one contemplated on-line merchant rebate sales scheme. In preferred embodiments, a Registered Member 400 with an established on-line connection (See FIG. 2, at 201-203, and 205) proceeds to enter the TuitionFund.com Web Site 410. Once the member obtains access to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 410, the member may then generally proceed to the participating on-line merchants links and pages area (See FIG. 3, at 315).

Next, the present invention contemplates that the registered member will Select 415 one or more participating merchants from which to purchase goods and/or services. In particularly preferred embodiments, the selected On-line Merchant 420 will be registered with a Rebate Network Manager 430. The present invention contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 430 monitors the sales of its Registered On-line Merchants 420. When a registered merchant consummates a sale of goods or services with a Registered Member 400, the Rebate Network Manager 430 debits the account of the Registered On-line Merchant 420, based on an existing formula, and calculates the rebate due the Registered Member 400. The present invention also contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 430 receives a small percentage of each consummated sale involving one of its Registered On-line Merchants 420, and also calculates a percent fee, from 0.001±30.00%, based on the sum of the particular transaction, as a payment to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 410. The Rebate Network Manager 430 disburses the rebate sum earned by a particular Registered Member 400 from each transaction with a Registered On-line Merchant 420, to the professional Money Manager 440 for further disbursement into the Registered Member’s 400 various investment Fund and Accounts options 450 (See also FIG. 1, at 115). In preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 430 affiliate may comprise a service such as InfoSpace.com. In addition, as stated above, in particular embodiments, the professional Money Managers 440 contemplated may comprise Charles Schwab, Fidelity, American Express, or Merrill Lynch.

III. Merchants not Registered with a Rebate Network Manager

FIG. 5 is a flow chart briefly illustrating another contemplated merchant rebate scheme. In a preferred embodiment, a Registered Member 500 with an established on-line connection (See FIG. 2, at 201-203, and 205) proceeds to enter the TuitionFund.com Web Site 510. Once the member obtains access to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 510, the member may then generally proceed to the participating on-line merchants links and pages area (See FIG. 3, at 315). Next, the present invention contemplates that the Registered Member 500 will proceed to Select 515 one or more participating On-line Merchants 520 (i.e., merchants affiliated/registered with the tracking entity, but not registered with network rebate manager) for purchasing goods/services. It is contemplated that the Registered Member 500 and the On-line Merchants 520 will proceed to consummate a transaction for the sale of goods/services.

In preferred embodiments, a Tracking Entity 525 monitors and compiles information about the transactions between Registered Members 500 and On-line Merchants 520. In preferred embodiments, the Tracking Entity 525 will periodically and regularly communicate this information to either TuitionFund.com or the TuitionFund.com Web Site 510. The present invention contemplates that such information may include the date, transaction amount, the rebate due, or rebate percentage offered, and member account information, etc. The present invention also contemplates that the On-line Merchants 520 will remit directly to an account maintained by TuitionFund.com or another entity any rebate monies earned by Registered Members 500 from the sale of goods/services. The amount of the rebate monies awarded by the On-line Merchants 520 to Registered Members 500 may vary based on established formulas, sale incentives, or other calculations particular to the On-line merchants 520.

In other preferred embodiments, the On-line Merchant 520 directly remits to TuitionFund.com a percentage, or fixed amount, of each Registered Member’s 500 transactions it...
consummates as revenue to the TuitionFund.com. In some embodiments, the percentage remitted by the On-line Merchant is based on total sales to Registered Members 500. Alternatively, the sum remitted may be based on a fixed percentage amount (e.g., 0.001-30.00%) of each sale to an individual Registered Member 500. In particularly preferred embodiments, the On-line Merchant 520 establishes and funds a debitable account held at TuitionFund.com, or another entity, for the purpose of disbursing from such account those monies earned by Registered Members 500 on purchases consummated with the particular On-line Merchant 520. Alternatively, the On-line Merchant may deposit funds into an aggregate account held at TuitionFund.com, or another entity, such aggregate account comprising rebate funds from numerous On-line Merchants 520. It is contemplated that each On-line Merchant will deposit in either the aggregate account or an account particular to that On-line Merchant 520 preferably a sum of from about 10,000-50,000 dollars, more preferably from 50,000 to 100,000 dollars, and most preferably from 100,000 to 1,000,000 or more dollars. The present invention contemplates that the On-line Merchant debitable account may be funded by the On-line Merchant regularly and periodically, or at such times as agreed upon by TuitionFund.com and the particular On-line Merchant 520, the present invention further contemplates that TuitionFund.com may use any portion of the On-line Merchant 520 debitable account funds for any lawful purpose, and may collect and use any interest or premiums that may accrue on the debitable accounts.

In preferred embodiments, the Tracking Entity 525 provides relevant reports concerning Registered Member 500 transactions with On-line Merchants 520 to a Rebate Network Manager 530. The content of such reports may include, but is not limited to, information concerning the date and time of particular transaction, Registered Member 500 identification, the particular On-line Merchant, the rebate monies due to the Registered member 500, the amount owed TuitionFund.com, and any other relevant information about the transaction.

In certain preferred embodiments, the Tracking Entity 525 will periodically and regularly communicate information concerning member transactions to TuitionFund.com 510. The present invention further contemplates that the such information may include the date, transaction amount, the rebate due, or rebate percentage offered, and member account information, etc. Additionally, the Tracking Entity 525 may communicate information to TuitionFund.com 510 concerning Registered Member 500 spending habits, for example, compiled information on the frequency of purchases, general of merchants visited, or other topical information obtained by the Tracking Entity 525 from the various On-line Merchants 520. Alternatively, TuitionFund.com 510 may collect and order the various Registered Member 500 purchasing data and information communicated to it from the Tracking Entity 525. The present invention further contemplates that member purchasing information may be gathered from an number of sources, including but not limited to, the various merchant rebate schemes disclosed, an affiliated tracking entity/ rebate network manager, or from third party consumer monitoring and market research organizations. In other preferred embodiments, and subject to TuitionFund’s member terms and conditions and privacy policy, member purchasing information may solicit advertising interest from site and organizations not already registered or affiliated with TuitionFund.com. Additionally, subject to TuitionFund’s member terms and conditions and privacy policy, TuitionFund.com may communicate information concerning the transactions between one or more Registered Members 500 and one or more On-line Merchants 520. For example, TuitionFund.com may communicate any pertinent information concerning the gross sales, unit volumes, and/or marketing and consumer research, of one or more On-line Merchants 520, or more particular information concerning one or more Registered Member’s 500 spending purchases and the like.

The present invention contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 530 may use the information communicated to it by TuitionFund.com for any agreed upon business purposes. The Rebate Network Manager 530 may likewise further tabulate and calculate any sums due or owing to either TuitionFund.com 510 or the Registered Member 500 from this information. In particularly preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 530 may debit the debitable accounts established by the On-line Merchants 520 and transfer a particular earned rebate to the Money Manager 540; alternatively, TuitionFund.com 510 may debit these debitable accounts and transfer the earned rebate to the Money Manager 540. Additionally, the present invention contemplates that any Registered Member 500 rebate monies earned that are transferred may be transferred in the aggregate for a particular groupings of Registered Members 500, or particular groupings of Registered Member 500 transactions.

Thus, the present invention contemplates that any necessary information for awarding or allocating an earned sum to a particular member may be performed by the Rebate Network Manager 530 based on the information communicated to it by On-line Merchant(s) 520, the Tracking Entity 525, or TuitionFund.com 510. Alternatively, in yet other embodiments, the information may be attached to the ultimate transfer of member earned rebate monies to the Money Manager 540 for disbursement and award to a particular Registered Member’s Rebate Accounts 550 (See also, FIG. 1, at 115). In still further embodiments, TuitionFund.com 510 may transfer the rebate monies earned by Register Members 500 directly to the Money Manager 540. In these particular embodiments, the present invention contemplates that the transfer of monies from TuitionFund.com 510 to the Money Manager 540 may also entail and pertinent data for disbursing the monies. The present invention is not intended to be limited to any particular methodology for awarding and crediting a particular member with his/her earned rebate monies.

The present invention is also not intended to be limited by the terms of calculating either the rebate monies earned by Registered Members 500, or the revenue monies due to TuitionFund.com from transactions between Registered Members 500 and particular On-line Merchants 520. Indeed, any commercially practicable agreement may be accepted within the scope of the present invention. Moreover, the present invention is not intended to be limited to any of the described calculations for determining whether a sum is payable or owing to any party. Furthermore, where any such sums are payable or owing, it is not intended that the present invention be limited by the method of transferring such sums or amounts (e.g., checks, drafts, negotiable instruments, offsets, credits, or any other means of transferring wealth). The present invention is also not intended to be limited by the means employed to accomplish any particular transfer of a sum due or owing (e.g., electronic transfers, wire transfers, checks, debits, and the like, are all within the scope of the present invention).

In some preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 530 may comprise service providers such as, but not limited to, InfoSpace.com. In other preferred embodiments, the Tracking Entity 525 may comprise service providers, such as but not limited to, LinksShare.com, or Bedree.com.
IV. Off-Line Merchants

FIG. 6 is a flowchart briefly illustrating yet another contemplated merchant rebate sales scheme. Registered Member (off-line) 600 may Select 615 to visit a Point-of-Sale Merchant 620 (i.e., at the merchant's place of business). In preferred embodiments, the Registered Member (off-line) 600 and the Point-of-Sale Merchant 620 will consummate a sale of goods or services. In preferred embodiments, the Point-of-Sale Merchant 620 is indirectly connected via a communications link to a Rebate Network Manager 640. The present invention contemplates that the Point-Sale-Merchant 620 will be registered with the Rebate Network Manager 640. In particular, preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 640 calculates the rebate due the Registered Member 600 based on an existing formula, and then debits the account of the Point-of-Sale Merchant 620 for the rebate awarded the Registered Member (off-line) 600. The present invention further contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 640 receives a small percentage of each consummated sale involving a Point-of-sale Merchant 620, and also calculates a percent fee, from 0.001±30.00%, based on the sum of the particular transaction, as a payment to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 610. The Rebate Network Manager 640 disburses the rebate sum earned by a particular Registered Member 600 from each transaction with a Point-of-Sale Merchant 620, to the professional Money Manager 650 for further disbursement into the Registered Member's 600 various investment Funds and Accounts 660 (See also FIG. 1, at 115). In preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 640 affiliate may comprise a service such as InfoSpace.com, or like service providers. Also, as stated above, in particular embodiments, the professional Money Managers 650 contemplated may comprise Charles Schwab, Fidelity, American Express, or Merrill Lynch, or similar financial services firms.

All publications and patents mentioned in the above specification are herein incorporated by reference. Various modifications and variations of the described method and system of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention. Although the invention has been described in connection with specific preferred embodiments, it should be understood that the invention as claimed should not be unduly limited to such specific embodiments. Indeed, various modifications of the described modes for carrying out the invention which are obvious to those skilled in relevant fields are intended to be within the scope of the following claims.

I claim:

1. A method of providing a rebate program, the rebate program including registered members, registered member credit card accounts, and registered member rebate accounts in which to apply rebates earned by registered members, at least one registered merchant offering rebates to registered members with registered debit or credit card accounts, the method comprising:
   a) at a rebate network manager connected to said at least one registered merchant via processors that track debit or credit card account purchases to provide debit and credit card account transaction information, receiving debit and credit card account transaction information associated with a registered merchant;  
   b) via said rebate network manager operating a centralized processing system configured to monitor all of said debit and credit card account transaction information from said processors and associated with a registered merchant to determine if said transactions are consummated with registered members using said registered member card accounts, wherein said rebate network manager's central processing system is located at a location other than the location of the merchant,  
   c) calculating a rebate based upon an existing formula for a purchase by said registered member from said registered merchant, and  
   d) generating information needed to apply rebate monies earned to at least one rebate account of a registered member.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein a member's rebate account is selected from a group, including mutual funds, a savings account, bond funds, stock index funds, money market accounts, annuities, educational IRA, state 529 Plan, or any other investment grade security or equity allowed by law, a charitable donation account, or a loan payment account.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein the member's rebate account earns interest or dividends and the rebate monies can be applied against fees normally assessed against such accounts and their activity.

4. The method of claim 2, further comprising: generating information needed to apply the rebate monies in a member's rebate account towards higher education expenses including tuition, fees, room, board and any other expenses incidental to obtaining a higher education.

5. The method of claim 4, wherein the indebtedness is a) principal, b) interest or the payoff of the rate of interest, or c) fees normally assessed against an indebtedness account and its activity.

6. The method of claim 2, wherein further comprising: generating information needed to apply the rebate monies in a member's rebate account towards higher education expenses including tuition, fees, room, board and any other expenses incidental to obtaining a higher education.

7. The method of claim 2, further comprising managing said at least one member's rebate account.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein the rebate monies applied to the member's rebate account is an amount equal to or less than said calculated rebate.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein said processors that track debit or credit card account purchases are associated with a tracking entity in communication with a rebate network manager, wherein said tracking entity may provide further additional member transaction information.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein a registered merchant offers a different rebate rate for online versus on-site purchase transactions as well as a different rebate rate for credit card account versus debit card account purchase transactions.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein the rebate network manager may receive a portion of each consummated sale or rebate as compensation for its services.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein a sponsoring organization may receive a portion of each consummated sale or rebate as compensation for its services.

13. The method of claim 1, further comprising providing a registration organization, wherein said registration organization receives a portion of said rebate.

14. A system for providing a rebate program, the rebate program including registered members, registered member credit card accounts, registered member debit card accounts, registered member rebate accounts in which to apply rebates earned by registered members, a network of registered merchants offering rebates to registered members with registered debit or credit card accounts, the system comprising:
   a) a centralized rebate network manager processing system located at a location other than the location of the merchant, said centralized rebate network manager process-
19. The method of claim 15, further comprising:
applying the funds in a member’s rebate account towards
higher education expenses including tuition, fees, room,
and other expenses incidental to a higher education.

20. The method of claim 15, wherein the predefined for-
mula includes different rebate rates for on-line purchases
versus point-of-sale purchases.

21. The method of claim 15, wherein the predefined for-
mula includes different rebate rates for purchases consum-
ated with credit card accounts versus debit card accounts.

22. A system for managing a rebate program, the rebate
program including registered member debit or credit card
accounts, registered member rebate accounts, registered mer-
chants offering merchant specific rebates for purchases, and a
rebate network manager connected to said registered mer-
chants via at least one processor that tracks credit or debit
card account transactions to provide debit or credit card
account transaction information, said at least one processor
being located at a location other than the location of a
registered merchant, the system comprising:
a plurality of networked processors configured to:
receive transaction information for a registered mer-
chant, said transaction information including all the
credit or debit card account transactions provided by
said processors for the registered merchant;
correlate the received account transaction information
with registered member debit or credit card account
information to determine which transactions were
consummated with a registered member; and
calculate a rebate for each transaction determined to be
consummated with a registered member debit or
credit card account;
a processor configured to generate information needed
to apply rebate monies earned by a registered member to
the registered member’s rebate account; and
memory for storing member registered card account
information and the received merchant transaction infor-
mation.

23. A computer readable medium having stored thereon
computer code configured to manage a rebate program, the
rebate program including registered member credit and debit
card accounts, registered member rebate accounts, registered mer-
chants offering merchant specific rebates for purchases, and a
rebate network manager connected to said registered mer-
chants via at least one processor that tracks credit and debit
card account transactions to provide debit and credit card
account transaction information, said at least one processor
being located at a location other than the location of a
registered merchant, the computer code causing at least one
processor to:
receive and store member information including identifi-
cation of at least one member debit or credit card
account;
correlate the received account transaction information
with registered member debit or credit card account
information to determine which transactions were
consummated with a registered member’s registered card
account and the received merchant transaction informa-
tion.

21. A method of providing a rebate program, the rebate program including registered members, registered member credit card accounts, registered member debit card accounts, registered member rebate accounts in which to apply rebates earned by registered members, at least one registered merchant offering rebates to registered members, the method comprising:

a) at a rebate network manager connected to at least one registered merchant via processors that track debit or credit card account purchases to provide debit and credit card account transaction information, receiving debit and credit card account transaction information associated with a registered merchant;

b) via said rebate network manager operating a centralized processing system configured to monitor all of said debit or credit card account transaction information provided by said at least one processor and associated with a registered merchant to determine if said transactions are consummated with registered members using said registered debit and credit card accounts, wherein said rebate network manager’s centralized processing system is located at a location other than the location of the merchant;

c) debiting an account of a registered merchant based on an existing formula and calculating a rebate due to the registered member; and

d) generating information needed to apply rebate monies earned to at least one rebate account of a registered member.

22. A method of providing a rebate program, the rebate program including at least one registered debit or credit card account for a registered member, registered member rebate accounts in which to apply rebates earned by registered members, at least one registered merchant offering rebates to registered members with registered debit or credit card accounts, the method comprising:

a) at a rebate network manager connected to said at least one registered merchant via at least one processor that tracks debit or credit card account purchases to provide debit or credit card account transaction information, receiving debit or credit card account transaction information associated with a registered merchant;

b) via said rebate network manager operating a centralized processing system configured to monitor all of said debit or credit card account transaction information provided by said at least one processor and associated with a registered merchant to determine if said transactions are consummated with registered members using said registered member card accounts, wherein said rebate network manager’s centralized processing system is located at a location other than the location of the merchant,

c) calculating a rebate based upon an existing formula for a purchase by said registered member from said registered merchant, and

d) generating information needed to apply rebate monies earned to at least one rebate account of a registered member.

25. The method of claim 25, wherein a member’s rebate account is selected from a group, including mutual funds, a savings account, bond funds, stock index funds, money market accounts, annuities, educational IRA, state 529 Plan, or any other investment grade security or equity allowed by law, a charitable donation account, or a loan payment account.