

Concerned About How to Pay for College?

Dear Student,

In your Universal Encouragement Program guidance survey, you indicated a concern about paying for college.

College costs can seem overwhelming, but you do not have to figure everything out on your own. We can work together to explore financial aid, compare affordable options, and develop a plan for college or career training after high school.

Start with what college will actually cost you.

A college's advertised price does not necessarily tell you what you will pay. Financial aid can make a significant difference.

When comparing schools, consider the full **cost of attendance**: tuition, fees, housing, food, books, supplies, transportation, and personal expenses. Then subtract grants and scholarships to estimate your **net price**. Loans help you finance that price; they do not reduce it. A school with a higher advertised price may sometimes cost you less after financial aid.

Before applying, use the **net price calculator** on each college's website. Its estimate can help you plan, although it is not a guaranteed aid offer.

Understand the ways you can pay.

Your plan may combine several sources:

- **Grants:** Usually based on financial need and generally do not require repayment if you meet the conditions.
- **Scholarships:** Awards based on qualifications such as financial need, academic achievement, career interests, community involvement, or talents. They generally do not require repayment.
- **Work-study or other employment:** Money you earn through a job. Work-study is paid as you work, rather than provided as an upfront grant.
- **Savings and family assistance:** Contributions that you and your family can realistically afford.
- **Student loans:** Money you borrow and must repay, generally with interest.

Understand which parts of an aid offer are grants, scholarships, wages, or loans before deciding how to cover your costs.

Apply for financial aid—even if you are unsure what you might receive.

The **Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)** is the application for federal student aid. States and colleges also use FAFSA information for many of their programs.

Visit [StudentAid.gov](https://studentaid.gov) to apply. The application is free. If you are a senior preparing to enroll after graduation, complete the FAFSA for the academic year in which you will begin college. You can apply before receiving college admission decisions.

State financial aid deadlines may be earlier—sometimes much earlier—than the federal FAFSA deadline. Colleges may also have earlier priority deadlines. Check all three, and submit your application as soon as it becomes available. Meeting the federal deadline alone does not mean you have met state or college deadlines. You must complete a new FAFSA each year you seek federal student aid.

Some colleges also require the [CSS Profile](#) or their own financial aid application. Check each college's requirements and ask about available fee waivers.

Search for scholarships in several places.

Begin with your counseling office and the financial aid websites of colleges you are considering. Also ask about scholarships from community foundations, local organizations, employers, unions, and professional associations.

Useful online resources include:

- [**BigFuture: Pay for College**](#): Financial aid guides, planning tools, and a scholarship search.
- [**CareerOneStop Scholarship Finder**](#): Scholarship listings that you can filter to find relevant opportunities. Confirm current requirements and deadlines on the scholarship sponsor's website.
- [**Federal Student Aid Resources**](#): Official information and tools for understanding financial aid.
- [**FAFSA Checklist**](#): Guidance on the information and accounts needed to apply.
- [**Consumer Financial Protection Bureau: Paying for College**](#): Tools for comparing costs, aid offers, and borrowing options.

Keep a calendar of scholarship deadlines and allow time to request recommendations or prepare essays. Check whether each award is renewable and what you must do to keep it.

You do not need to pay to search for scholarships. Be cautious of anyone who guarantees an award in exchange for an upfront fee.

Explore ways to keep costs manageable.

Depending on your goals, options might include attending an in-state public college, living at home, beginning at a community college, or choosing a certificate or career training program. If you plan to transfer, confirm that your courses will transfer and apply to your intended degree.

Employer tuition assistance and college credit earned during high school may also help. Compare the total cost of completing your program, not just the first year. Online programs can offer flexibility, but compare their costs and student support carefully.

Talk with a college financial aid advisor.

You can request a meeting in person, by phone, or online. Useful questions include:

- What grants and scholarships might I qualify for?
- Are there additional applications or priority deadlines?
- What would my estimated cost be after grants and scholarships?
- Will my aid continue in later years, and what are the renewal requirements?
- How would an outside scholarship affect my aid offer?
- If my family's finances have changed, can my aid eligibility be reviewed?
- If I need a loan, how much would I borrow over the entire program, and what could repayment involve?

You do not have to accept every loan offered. Ask for help understanding the terms before borrowing.

Middle school students and students in the early years of high school can explore options and learn about costs. Students nearing graduation should be aware of early admissions and aid deadlines.

Consider how applying early may affect your financial choices.

Some colleges have early or priority admission deadlines that also affect scholarship consideration. Applying early does not automatically increase your financial aid, but missing a scholarship deadline may limit your opportunities.

Early action is generally nonbinding, allowing you to compare financial aid offers before choosing a college. **Early decision** is a commitment to attend if admitted and the financial arrangements are workable, so it usually limits your opportunity to compare offers from different colleges.

If affordability is a major concern, talk with your counselor before applying early decision. Use the college's **net price calculator**, review its financial aid policies, and ask what happens if its offer does not make attendance affordable. Check admission, scholarship, and financial aid deadlines separately.

I know this can be a confusing process. Bring your questions and any schools, training programs, or aid offers you are considering. Together, we can sort out the best options for moving forward.

Sincerely,
Your Counselor