

Why College Is So Costly

Today's college prices will seem cheap when compared to tomorrows. Still, they're rising at alarming rates -- far faster than inflation. Several in-state public schools have recently increased tuition costs. As an example, the University of California announced a tuition price increase of 9.6 percent -- on top of an already approved 8 percent increase -- beginning this fall. Even at low-tuition schools, college costs soar when students add an extra year, lose a scholarship or experience a dramatic change in their financial situation. **Below are six reasons why college is costly and, more importantly, what you can do to fight it.**

Reason No. 1: Tuition is high: If you find yourself facing sky-high tuition without a substantial financial aid package, cut your college time short. "Consider early college opportunities as a way to get some credits students need before college. That can reduce the number of years (you're) in school," In addition to taking Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and dual-enrollment courses in high school, students can earn college credits through College Level Examination Program, or CLEP exams, community college and summer school courses. If a high-priced school is your dream college, consider attending a two-year institution and transferring.

Reason No. 2: It takes five-plus years to graduate: For a student who enters a four-year college, average graduation time is five and a half years. Research from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, a nonprofit education think tank in Boulder, Colo., reveals that the average four-year college only graduates 55.5 percent of its students within six years. If a student is forced to stay at school longer than four years because he or she can't get the proper classes in time, Smith recommends approaching the financial aid office, mentioning his or her stellar academic track record (if applicable) and asking for additional funding. Students may be able to sidestep the problem by charting their educational curriculum with an adviser during their freshman year and taking more than the minimal number of courses each semester.

Reason No. 3: Room and board is pricey: According to the College Board, the average cost of room and board at a four-year public institution is \$8,535 per year. That's \$930 more than the cost of tuition and fees. Students can save on room and board by choosing cheaper dorms and smaller meal plans.

The catch is that off-campus housing usually requires students to pay rent year-round instead of just during the school year. A better option to save on room and board could be through a resident adviser position. While some schools offer RAs a paid salary -- meaning that you must pay taxes on it and it could subtract from your financial aid package -- other institutions offer RAs free room and board.

Reason No. 4: Your circumstances have changed: Students who encounter a surprise situation that drastically reduces the amount their family can contribute to college should head to the financial aid office. That kind of information should be reported immediately. Students should make sure they document all of those changes in writing." In cases of family death, divorce, job loss or unexpected medical bills, financial aid officers frequently have the ability to increase a student's aid package at the last minute. To be eligible for extra funding, students must file a professional judgment and provide proof.

Reason No. 5: You lost your scholarship: Some schools offer hefty financial aid packages to lure freshmen in, but don't renew the awards in subsequent years. Students can also lose merit award money by not maintaining a required GPA, moving from full- to part-time attendance or dropping a required club or major. If their financial aid package changes after their freshman year, they should meet with a financial aid officer right away to see if there is any negotiating room, particularly if the student can demonstrate a change in family finances. Students can also apply for outside grants by checking out what's offered in their community and through scholarship search engines such as Fastweb.com and MeritAid.com.

Reason No. 6: Yikes! More tuition hikes!: If your school is imposing a significant tuition increase, you could be in the clear. As the costs go up, financial aid might go up accordingly. Every campus won't have the resources to meet increased student need. But students can prepare by investigating whether their school has a tuition lock program. Available at a handful of institutions, tuition locks allow students to lock in one price during their freshman year that they will pay for all four years, regardless of how much tuition increases. If your school doesn't have a tuition lock, students can counterbalance a price hike by seeking outside scholarships, pleading their case to a financial aid officer and using funds from a prepaid 529 plan to foot increased bills.

Recommended by NWSOFA College Outreach Team
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