

Financial Aid, Scholarships, & Paying for College

Overview

Financial aid is any assistance that is provided to support families with paying for college education. This can come from the federal government, the state government, the college or institution itself, or outside sources. Financial aid also comes in many forms, which we'll review here, including grants and scholarships, loans, and work study.

The most complex thing about financial aid, college costs, and affordability is that it varies greatly by individual family and by institution. The same college could cost literally \$0 for one student, while costing another student \$70,000/year. So, one of the most important places to start in understanding financial aid is your family's unique financial situation, which will help determine what colleges are a fit for you.

The Basics of How Financial Aid Works

To over simplify the process, here's a very basic version of how the financial aid and scholarships process works. In the fall of a student's senior year, students and families complete forms that collect key information about their financial situation.

Each college then uses this information to determine the "financial aid package" that they will provide the student, considering how much money students need to attend, as well as other qualifications such as a student's academic record. Every college approaches this differently - some emphasize providing students aid based upon their need (finances) and some emphasize their merit (academics). After a student is admitted to a college, they receive the financial aid package explaining the cost to attend and the types of aid they received.

Understanding the Cost of College

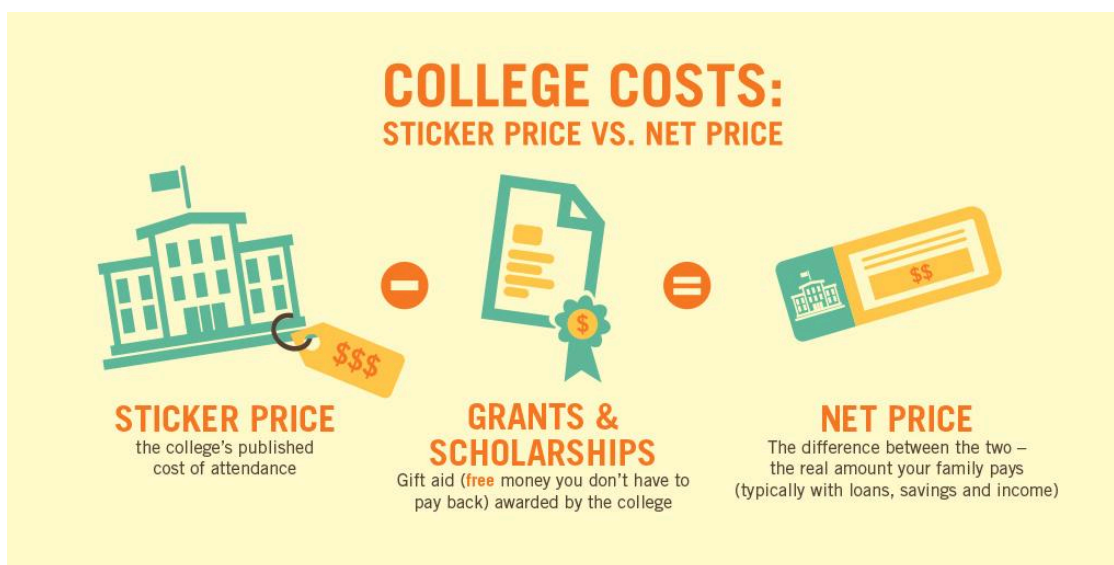
The cost of college truly depends on where you go to college and what type of college you are attending. For example, while a private college can cost anywhere from \$45-77,000 a year, a CUNY, or public colleges within the city of New York, will only cost \$6-10,000. But the cost of public colleges can also differ based on where you're going. If you plan on staying in state and attending a SUNY college, it'll only cost you \$20-27,000 a year, but if you want to attend a public college in a state where you don't have established residence then it can be anywhere from \$36-67,000.

What makes up college costs. The "cost" of college isn't actually all one price, though. The total amount that you see is a combined number of the cost of many different things that the college is billing for. These are called "*direct cost*". The breakdown is as follows:

- **Tuition:** This is the bulk of what the college bills you for, and it's what pays for your classes and what funds the institution as a whole and covers other educational expenses, such as the salaries of professors and other workers at the college.
- **Fees:** These cover the cost of "other" activities that you may participate in while in college, such as sports or extracurricular activities.
- **Room and board:** This covers the cost of housing and food while at college. If you are not going to a residential college, or if you are choosing to live off campus, you will not have to pay the room and board fees.

- *Other expenses*; Some colleges include “other expenses” in their total price for the college, such as cost of living, textbook money, and travel expenses to name a few. These are called “*indirect costs*”. Additionally, some colleges add the cost of the school’s health insurance to this, though it can be waived if you have an alternative insurance plan. But the cost of college is actually many different things all combined to create one big sticker price.

What is “Sticker Price”? Sticker price is the total yearly cost of attending a college before financial aid is applied. A college’s sticker price can be anywhere from \$10-77,000 depending on the type of college you apply to. The actual cost of attendance once financial aid is applied is referred to as *the net price* and is what you will pay to attend college. This high sticker price may scare you! Many colleges that have high sticker prices actually offer low net prices to students that are lower income-- so make sure you do your research.



Understanding Financial Aid: Need-Based Aid v. Merit Aid.

Need based aid (grants, scholarships, loans and work-study opportunities) given to students because they and their families are not able to pay the full cost of attending a certain college. Need-based aid is awarded based upon a determination made by the college of how much students can pay for college. Many colleges provide a lot of need-based aid for students!

Need based aid comes in the form of grants from the federal government for low income students (PELL grant), grants from the state government for low income students (TAP grant for students who stay in NYS), and grants from the colleges (individual institutions provide need-based grants for students to make their institutions more affordable). Students with high need can also qualify for programs such as federal subsidized loans and work-study.

Am I eligible for need-based aid? The formula to determine your eligibility for financial aid looks largely at the number of people in your family and your family income. Some colleges will consider other factors that can change this formula, such as value of home, savings, and investments. To qualify for the federal

PELL grant, families generally have an income less than \$60,000 and for the state TAP grant, families generally have an income less than \$80,000. Many private colleges award need-based aid based on the cost of their college and how much they think you would need to make the college affordable, meaning families that make more -- but still cannot pay full tuition -- receive some aid each year. The best way to determine your eligibility for your family's unique situation is to use the [Net Price Calculator](#).

Merit aid. Merit aid is financial assistance provided for academic, athletic, or other recognizable traits and qualifications. Sometimes merit aid is applied without a separate application. In cases like this, colleges will review a student's application and automatically apply a merit award. Sometimes a merit award requires a separate application or requires you to check a box when you apply. Some merit programs are for specific talents or skills (for example, a community service based award or a merit award for women in STEM).

Merit scholarships vary widely by institution. It's important to do your research to identify what merit scholarships are available and what qualifications are required. I recommend starting with a Google Search (College Name + Merit Scholarship) -- this will usually bring you to the college's financial aid page, where you can see what types of merit scholarships they offer and how to be eligible for these.

How do I get a merit scholarship? You do not need to be an astounding student to receive some form of merit aid. Instead, merit aid is awarded to students whose academic qualifications (usually determined by GPA, rigor of classes, and standardized test scores such as SAT/ACT) are above those for the institution that the student applies. Some merit scholarships are applied automatically by colleges based upon your application to that college, others require that you complete additional information or forms to apply. Some merit scholarships are non-academic, such as for artistic skill or community service. The most selective institutions in the United States (think, Ivy League + many top-tier institutions) don't offer *any* merit scholarships, and instead focus entirely on need-based aid to support students.

Below: Examples of merit scholarships offered by Dickinson College and SUNY Oswego, including requirements for qualification.

Grants and Scholarships

Tuition & Aid >

How to Apply >

Cost of Attendance >

Financial Assistance >

Cost Calculators >

Scholarships & Grants >

Meet the Staff >

Other Helpful
Information >

Dickinson's financial-aid packages include both grants and scholarships. Grants may be from the college's endowment, from state or federal sources or from outside agency funds, and most are based on demonstrated financial need. (Submit all required forms by your selected application deadline for need-based aid). Scholarships are designed to recognize the exemplary academic performance of prospective students without regard to financial need. The merit scholarship will be the first component of any need-based financial aid award.

We are committed to recognizing superior talent and service, regardless of financial need, as we seek students who will benefit from and contribute to Dickinson's vision: to be actively engaged with the wider world and challenged to think differently and act boldly. **Beginning in the fall of 2020 (class of 2024), the following academic merit scholarships will be awarded at the time of admission.**

THE PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARSHIP

\$35,000 per year

The Presidential Scholarship is worth \$140,000 toward tuition for eight semesters of full-time study at the college (including off-campus study in a Dickinson program or partner program). It is Dickinson's highest

Freshman Scholarships

These scholarships, available in three monetary levels, are awarded with priority to candidates with a strong record of classroom achievement and competitive test scores on either the SAT or ACT.

The middle fifty percent of the GPA and SAT or ACT of students awarded scholarships is as follows:

SCHOLARSHIP	AMOUNT	GPA	SAT	ACT
Presidential*	\$20,000* (4 years)	93-97	1250-1360	26-30
Dean	\$6,000 (4 years)	91-94	1170-1230	24-26
Merit	\$3,000 (4 years)	88-92	1120-1210	22-26

*Students entering in fall 2020 and after — \$5,000 annually for on-campus students.

Students entering in spring 2020 and prior — \$5,000 annually for on-campus students; \$2,500 per year for students living off-campus.

See full [Merit Scholarship Policy](#).

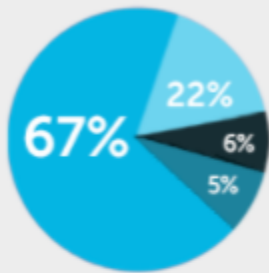
Understanding Financial Aid: Sources + Types of Aid

Types of Aid.

- Grants & Scholarships. Often called “gift aid” or “free money”, grants and scholarships are sources of financial aid students do not have to pay back! Sometimes grants and scholarships are used interchangeably when talking about awards.
 - Grants: Grants come from federal and state governments and from colleges. Most grants are need based, which means they are usually given based on your or your family's financial circumstances.

- Scholarships: Scholarships come from governments, colleges and private organizations. They may be awarded for academic or athletic ability, interest in a certain subject, or volunteer work, for example. Some scholarships are given based on membership in an ethnic or religious group.
- Loans. Loans are money borrowed that you have to pay back. A loan must be paid back with an extra charge called interest. The federal government offers low-interest loans, up to \$5,500 (with increased borrowing each year) to students with financial need. Other lenders charge more interest.
- Work Study. Through the federal work study program, the federal government gives money to colleges to pay students; these paid part-time jobs to help students pay for part of their college cost, usually up to \$2,000 a year. Students must apply for work on campus and then work in order to get this work-study money -- in most cases, it comes in the form of a paycheck, that can then be applied towards college.

DID YOU KNOW?



More than \$183.8 billion in financial aid was available to undergraduates in 2014-15. Financial aid comes from many sources:

- Federal government grants, loans and other aid: 67%
- College grants/scholarships: 22%
- Private and employer grants/scholarships: 6%
- State government grants/scholarships: 5%

Sources of Aid. A student's financial aid at a college usually comes from multiple sources. Financial aid primarily comes from the federal government, state government, institution (college) itself, and sometimes outside sources or scholarships.

- Federal Government. Our federal government provides need-based aid for students to make college more affordable. These include [Pell Grant](#), work-study, and federal loan programs (subsidized and unsubsidized loans). Read more about federal
- State Government. New York state also provides assistance to New York state residents studying within the state. The biggest of these programs are the TAP grant, Excelsior Scholarship, and the newly added NYS Dream Act. More on these below!
- The Institution Itself. The college you attend is a BIG source of financial aid, both need-based and merit-based, usually in the forms of grants and loans.
- Outside Scholarships. Many companies, foundations, community organizations and clubs sponsor grants or scholarships. Grants and scholarships from these private organizations are called outside, or private, scholarships. Begin specific to you or through connections, such as your parents' employers or labor unions, religious center, or local organizations.

New York State Aid Programs. New York State has many programs specific for New York State attending New York State colleges. I've discussed some of the primary ones below, but more information about specific NYS Scholarships & Awards and loan forgiveness programs [here](#).

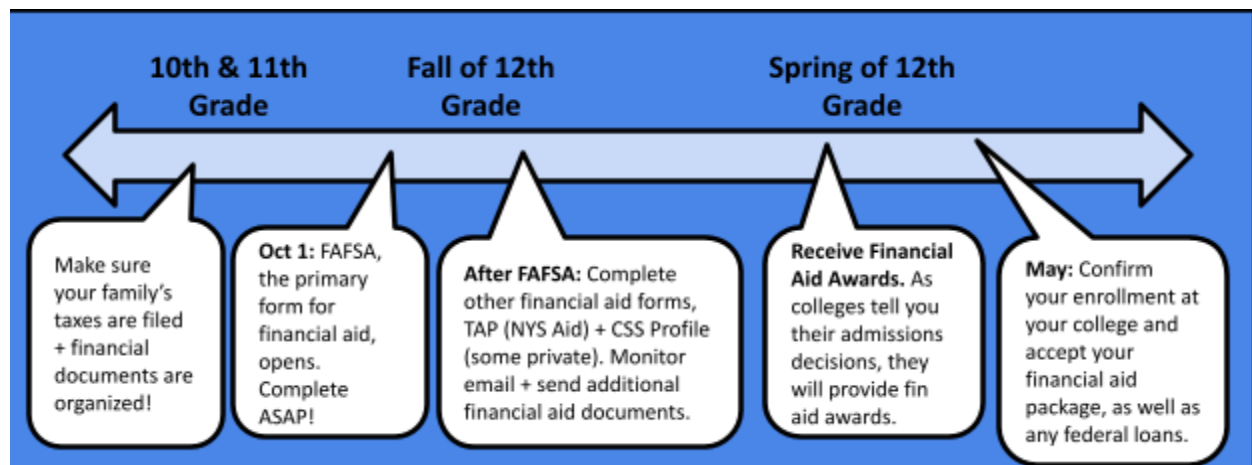
NYS Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) Grant. The Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), New York's largest grant program. TAP grants are based on the applicant's and his or her family's New York State taxable income. TAP grants can be used for full or part-time study at SUNY, CUNY, or any non-for-profit private institution within New York State. TAP awards are up to \$5,165 annually for families making under \$80,000 in NYS taxable income. More on award and eligibility [here](#).

Excelsior Scholarship. For NYS families making under \$125,000 annually, this covers the cost of tuition at New York State public institutions (SUNY and CUNY), up to \$5,500. To be eligible for the excelsior award, students must stay in New York State for the number of years they receive the award (so, for an undergraduate degree, 4 years) or else it becomes a loan. Students must also take 30 credits a year. Excelsior is usually opened up for applications in late spring / early summer - colleges will put a predicted excelsior grant on your financial aid package before you have officially applied for it. More [here](#).

NYS DREAM Act. NYS DREAM Act is a new state program that makes undocumented students and others (including students whose custodial parents live out of state) eligible for grants and scholarships within New York State, such as the TAP and Excelsior Scholarship. <https://www.hesc.ny.gov/dream/>

Applying for & Receiving Financial Aid

Timeline of Process Financial Aid Award Process.



- **10th & 11th Grade:** Make sure your parents' filed taxes and that you and your family's financial documents are well-organized. Your financial aid is based off of your family's income from the "prior prior year", so *two years* before you enroll in college. If you plan to enroll in college in fall of 2024, your family will need their 2022 taxes and documents; if you plan to enroll in college in fall of 2025, your family will need their 2023 taxes and documents.
- **Anticipated December 1 of 12th Grade Year:** FAFSA, the primary financial aid form, is open for students. Should be completed ASAP.
- **Fall of 12th Grade:** After completing FAFSA, complete the TAP (NYS Aid) and CSS Profile (some private colleges). Early is better. Colleges often have priority financial aid deadlines along with admissions deadlines in December - February.

- *Ongoing:* Make sure you send your FAFSA to all colleges on your list and the CSS Profile to all colleges that require it. Continue to monitor email and financial aid portals for additional requests for supporting documents, such as tax forms, benefit reports, non-filer information (more on this below).
- *Feb - April of 12th Grade:* As you receive admissions decisions, you will also receive financial aid awards (usually within 6 weeks of being admitted to a college, as long as your financial aid documentation is complete for that college)
- *May:* When you choose to finalize your enrollment in a college, which must be finalized by May 1 in most cases, you will also need to confirm your financial aid package (often by signing a paper or e-form). You will also have to accept your federal loans, if they are included in your financial aid package and sign a promissory note to confirm that you understand that you will need to repay the loans with interest.
- *July:* Receive your first bill. Most colleges send out bills in July, with first payment due in August.
- Remember: Students and families must complete the FAFSA and CSS Profile *every year* to continue to receive financial aid.

Financial Aid Forms. To receive both need-based financial aid and merit aid, families must complete forms that provide information to colleges about their financial situation. This is done by completing financial aid forms that summarize family's financial information. These must be filled out every year that a student intends to receive aid.

FAFSA. The primary form to apply for financial aid that all students and families should plan to complete is the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). It is required by all colleges to provide financial assistance. The FAFSA opens for students on October 1st of their senior year, and must be completed each year that a student is in college.

What type of information is requested? The FAFSA requests information about the income of your family, based upon your family's taxes from the "prior prior year", meaning the year before the year you plan to enroll in college. If you are planning to start college in fall of 2022, this means the information is based on your family's 2020 federal taxes, which is the information reported on the 1040 and associated schedules. The full list of FAFSA questions is linked here in the [Nitro Step-by-Step](#) breakdown. For families with questions about investments and retirement funds, here is some [clearly spelled out information about what you should report](#).

Who is considered a parent by the FAFSA? One question that always comes up for the FAFSA is who is considered a custodial parent, since parent income is a big influence on how much financial aid students qualify for. Lots of families have unique care situations - aunts or uncles or grandparents as primary caregivers, divorced parents who share custody, etc. The FAFSA isn't that nuanced though: it **ONLY** cares about the income of a student's primary custodial parent or parent(s) if they are married/live together, or in the case that a primary parent is remarried, a step-parent who is married to a primary custodial parent. [More detail on this here](#).

IRS Data Retrieval Tool. In many cases, the FAFSA can be linked with the IRS database to more easily complete the FAFSA using the [IRS Data Retrieval Tool](#). However, it doesn't work for all students and

families. It is very important for the IRS data retrieval tool to work that the address and names listed are spelled exactly the same as they are on the tax documents.

What can I do to prepare for filling out the FAFSA? For families, the most important way to be prepared for the financial aid process is to keep well-organized and accurate tax documents. For parents, it is incredibly important to file taxes if you need to and to follow regulations (for example, don't file separately and claim the student as a dependent on both).

CSS Profile. For some [private colleges](#) and a few public colleges, you must also submit the CSS Profile ([link to the application here](#)). The CSS Profile is a longer, more in-depth financial aid form that colleges use to gather additional information about your family's financial situation. It is required by colleges that offer more comprehensive financial aid packages and big need-based aid awards. Here's why: since these colleges give out more money, they want to be sure they fully understand a family's financial situation to make sure they are allocating funds the right way.

Filling out the CSS Profile: The CSS Profile asks for much of the same information as the FAFSA, so you can use a print out of your FAFSA summary report to help you answer questions on the CSS Profile. However, it also asks for additional information. The big difference on the CSS Profile is that it asks for more detailed financial information, including financial information from non-custodial parents, net worth of small family businesses, home equity, non-qualified annuities and medical expenses, etc.

CSS Profile IDOC + Document requests: For schools on the CSS Profile, they may require additional supporting documentation depending on the school. These additional documents are typically uploaded via an online portal called "IDOC". More on typical document requests below.

TAP (New York State Aid) Application. To qualify for New York State aid programs, students must also complete the TAP application, which is a NYS based financial aid form. After you submitted your FAFSA, if you initially said you were a New York State resident, it will allow you to link immediately to the TAP (Tuition Assistance Program) application. Please note, TAP is a grant for New York State schools (public and private) up to \$5,165. Eligibility and income required for TAP are available through [this link](#).

Additional Tax Forms + Materials Requests. It is important to check each college you applied to in order to make sure that you have submitted all the documentation they require. Requests for documentation may continue throughout the process and are not uniform.

- **Parent Non-filer:** If the college needs verification from the IRS that a parent doesn't file taxes, you can request this documentation directly from the IRS ([follow this link](#)). If your parent doesn't have a SSN but you need to provide non-filer status, you can usually work with the college to have an affidavit signed.
- **Non-custodial parent waiver:** The CSS Profile, unlike the FAFSA, requests information about both parents -- even if you're not in touch with one of your parents or one of your parents doesn't plan to be involved in paying for your college. If you've had *any* contact with a non-custodial parent, the college will likely still require you to include their information in your CSS Profile. If you have no way of being in touch with a non-custodial parent, you can work with your counselor to complete a non-custodial parent waiver letter. Any documentation you have, such as legal documents, can be helpful in making a case. Some colleges use this standard form for

non-custodial waivers, linked [here](#).

- Student Non-filer Form: Many colleges will request a signed form indicating that the student did not file taxes. Many colleges have their own version of this form. Here's [an example from Syracuse](#).
- Tax documents: Colleges will often request scans of financial aid documents, either sent electronically or by fax. The most common of these include your [1040](#) or 1040 EZ (main federal tax form), [W-2](#) (income statements from employers), [1099-MISC](#) (independent contractors), other 1099's (investments, benefits, etc.), [Schedule C](#) (business ownership / business income), Proof of Benefits, such as WIC or food stamps.
- Flagging for Verification: Some students get "flagged for verification", meaning the college is requesting an additional step to make sure they provided correct information on their FAFSA. It often requires that students send in their parents' 1040. Here's [an example of a standard verification form](#) from Lehman College.

Appealing Financial Aid or Change in Financial Situation Requests. Sometimes financial situations change. Remember, your financial aid is completed with your taxes and financial aid information from two years before students enroll in college (so, for example, for a student beginning college in 2022, this would be a family's 2020 finances + taxes). Of course, a lot can happen in that time.

If there is a significant change in your family's finances — such as a drop in income or unexpected medical expenses — you can submit an appeal asking the financial aid office to review your award. Be ready to provide proof of the change in your circumstances, such as bank statements, pay stubs or medical bills. But remember, it will take you time to prepare the appeal, and it will take the college time to act on it. College and financial aid offices will work with you, to the extent that they can, to make the institution affordable. Small appeals (\$5,000- 8,000) are much more likely to be approved than large requests.

Receiving & Reviewing Awards Letters. After a college has received all necessary documents to process your financial aid award, they will send you an "award letter" explaining the cost of the college and how much financial aid you are receiving to attend. These usually appear on an admitted student portal (a log in provided by the college) or could be emailed to you. The format of these varies by college and can be challenging to read sometimes!

Samples Award Letter:

College is pleased to assist in financing your education for the 2011 - 2012 Aid Year. All financial aid offered is considered to be supplemental to your resources (including resources from family and others, if applicable). Please review the General Terms and Conditions of your award carefully. These can be found on the reverse of this letter. Our office is here to help you navigate through the financial aid process as we comply with federal, state and institutional regulations in awarding aid. We encourage you to contact our staff with any questions.

TOTAL FINANCIAL AID (see reverse)		\$ 43,753			
TOTAL COST OF ATTENDANCE (see reverse)		\$ 58,426			
Financial Aid To Be Paid To Student Account					
	Total Loan	Lender Origination Fee	TOTAL	FALL	SPRING
Federal Subsidized Direct Loan	\$3,500	less \$18	3,482	1,741	1,741
Federal Pell Grant			5,550	2,775	2,775
College Grant			32,503	16,252	16,251
Aid Listed Above To Be Paid to Student Account			41,535	20,768	20,767
Outside Aid: No Outside Aid Reported To Date					
Total Financial Aid To Be Paid to Student Account		\$ 41,535	\$ 20,768	\$ 20,767	

Costs To Be Billed To Student Account

Standard Costs: Non-Waivable

Activity Fee	270	135	135
Room & Board	13,300	6,605	6,605

Award Letter Resources:

- Description of how to read [sample from Buffalo State](#)
- [Five Samples + Explanation from Nitro](#)
- [Several Samples of Different Aid Formats](#)
- [Demystifying Award Letters Presentation](#)
- [Financial Aid Letter Comparison tool](#)

Understanding + Learning About Financial Aid Policies

Different colleges have different policies surrounding financial aid and what they're looking at when taking your financial aid award into consideration. Although every college is different, here's some key policies that might come up when you're looking at colleges.

Need-blind: A student's financial situation is not considered when deciding whether or not to admit students.

Need-Aware: A student's financial situation is taken into account when deciding whether or not to admit students, but only so that the college can ensure that they can fulfill the financial needs of the student so that they are able to attend the school.

Meets 100% of Demonstrated Need: The college will fully match the students demonstrated financial need through a combination of grants, work study, scholarships, and student loans. For example, Amherst College is a need-blind institution that meets 100% of need, meaning Amherst College will provide as much financial aid as the student needs based on that student's demonstrated need and family contribution so that they will be able to attend the institution. For example, if a student's family was determined that they could pay \$5,000 a year for college and the college cost \$70,000 a year, a college that meets 100% of need would guarantee that they would provide \$65,000 of financial aid for that student (covering the remaining cost to attend). [A list of schools that meet 100% need can be found here.](#)

Meet ___% of Demonstrated Need: Some colleges will not meet 100% of need, but will tell you the amount that they guarantee (it could be something like 90% of need). This means that this college, at the least, promises to meet that percent of your family's demonstrated need.

Where do I find out if a college has a "good" financial aid? That question is hard to answer, because financial aid is dependent on each family's unique situation. For example, a college that meets 100% of demonstrated need might be great for a family who the government determines needs a lot of money to attend college, but might not provide any financial aid for a family whose income falls above the thresholds for need-based aid.

Colleges might also tell you information like the percent of students who receive some sort of aid **or** the average financial aid package that students receive. This information is useless! A college could give every student \$1,000 to every student to attend a college that costs \$60,000 a year, and claim that "100% of students receive some form of financial support". Or, an average financial aid package *might* be \$30,000, but your situation is not average - you could receive way more or way less.

Instead, a good place to start is the [US Department of Ed College](#) Scorecard Search Engine. It tells you

more detailed information, like average cost by income. Naviance also shows average cost based on income bracket, which is more useful.

Outside Scholarships

Many companies, foundations, community organizations and clubs sponsor grants or scholarships. Grants and scholarships from these private organizations are called outside, or private, scholarships. These can be big scholarships that cover a lot of costs, to small scholarships for books or expenses.

Outside scholarships can be very helpful in funding your college education, but you are more likely to get support from the college or institution you attend -- the biggest outside scholarships that provide the most money are often super competitive. You shouldn't plan to rely on outside scholarships to fund your education, but again, they can definitely help!

Where to begin your search. The outside scholarships you are most likely to receive are those that are specific to you, your family, and your interests. Start with local connections -- your neighborhood, your religious organization, your parent/guardian's employer(s), etc. After that, focus on scholarships that are specific to you. Are you a woman interested in biomedical engineering? Are you a Latinx student interested in architecture? Focus on features that are most unique to you.

Search engines. There are lots of search engines for outside scholarships!

- [Colleges of Distinction](#) - The Mega List of Scholarships
- [Chegg.org](#)
- [Fastweb.org](#)
- [Niche](#)
- [Unigo](#)
- [Cappex](#)
- [Nitro Scholarships for Underrepresented Students](#)
- [College Greenlight](#)
- [DoSomething.org](#)

"Big Ticket" Outside Scholarships (More on this in Opportunity Programs).

- [QuestBridge](#): QuestBridge is a full scholarship to attend an institution that a student is "matched" with. Students' families must make less than \$65,000 / year. QuestBridge is for high achieving students (mostly A's in classes) with strong test scores (1280+ SAT or 27+ ACT).
- [Posse](#): Posse is a full scholarship to attend an institution that a student is "matched" with. Posse has an intensive application process, focused on leadership and resilience.
- [Gates Foundation](#): Gates Foundation Scholarship is highly selective, last-dollar scholarship for exceptional, Pell-eligible, minority, high school seniors.

National Merit Scholarship + Related Programs. National Merit is a scholarship program based off of PSAT/NMSQT scores, which is the PSAT students have the option of taking in their 11th grade fall. The score required to be a commended scholar (top 3-4%), semi-finalist (top 1%) and finalist varies from state to state. The National Merit Scholarship award for students who are selected from the pool of finalists as "winners" are awarded a \$2,500 scholarship. Some specific colleges may offer individual PSAT/NMSQT-based scholarships. More info on the [National Merit Scholarship Qualification](#) process here. There are also other PSAT/NMSQT-based scholarships, offered through specific companies. To

determine whether or not your parents work for a company that offers a PSAT-NMSQT score-based scholarship, please consult the PSAT/NMSQT guide. [The 2019 guide is linked here.](#)

Understanding how they impact financial aid packages. Getting an outside, or private, scholarship *can* actually reduce the amount of financial aid you get from your college. But that doesn't mean you'll have to pay a bigger share of your college costs. It just means that the scholarship dollars replace financial-aid-package dollars. Read more [here](#).

Undocumented + Non-Citizen Students in the Financial Aid Process

College can be affordable, even if you are undocumented or are not a US citizen! While the financial aid process looks very different, students who are not American citizens or do not have an eligible status in the United States can still receive funding for college.

First of all... who qualifies for federal student aid? American citizens, students with "green cards", and students who meet a few other eligible immigration statuses ([listed here](#)). Your parents' immigration status **does not** impact your eligibility for federal student aid.

Undocumented/non-citizen students in the financial aid process. Students who are not US citizens or meet the requirements above do not qualify for federal aid. However, they can be eligible for aid from the college itself and aid from state governments. In New York State, the newly passed New York State Dream ACT allows non-citizen students to qualify for all NYS aid, such as TAP grant and Excelsior. In New York State, non-citizen students are also eligible for in-state aid at SUNY and CUNY, as long as they have attended high school in New York City/State.

Private colleges and aid for non-citizen students. Just as with students who are US citizens, it's important to research and understand different college policies around aid for non-citizen students. This can be a little tricky, because since non-citizen students don't qualify for federal aid programs, colleges instead need to fund these students with only the institution's money, so their financial aid policies may vary for students who do not have citizenship. You can look for colleges that pledge to continue to meet student need, regardless of immigration status, or colleges that offer significant merit aid packages. While students who are not citizens cannot complete the FAFSA, the college will likely still ask for information about your family's finances through the CSS Profile or other format. [This list is a great resource](#) -- it shows need and merit-based policies for non-resident students!

Students with undocumented parents. Students who are US Citizens or meet eligibility criteria but whose parents are non-citizens can still complete the FAFSA and qualify for financial aid programs! When filling out the FAFSA use "000000000" instead of providing a SSN for the parent. When your FAFSA is complete, parents without SSN will not be able to sign electronically. You'll have to print out the signature page from the online FAFSA form so that your parents can sign it and mail it to the address indicated for the FAFSA.

If your parent(s)/guardian(s) did not file taxes, the school's financial aid office will still want to know how much your family income is. A notarized letter from the place where your parent/guardian works stating how much they earned and how long they've worked there is also a proof of income.

Outside Scholarships & other Resources: [Dream.US Scholarship](#) is a scholarship for students who are DREAMers or who meet the eligibility requirements (came to the US before 16, etc.). The scholarship is

up to \$29,000 for a bachelor's degree at 70+ [partner institutions](#). Other scholarships available to undocumented students are [linked here](#).

Want more information? Check out [CARA's undocumented student toolkit](#).

Making a College List that Fits You & Your Family's Finances

I'll say it one more time: affordability and financial aid are incredibly individual. What types of colleges might be a good financial fit for one student may not work for another. It's incredibly important that you design your college list with an awareness of what is affordable for your family and what types of institutions might have financial aid programs that work for you.

1. **Have an honest conversation as a family about finances.** It can be hard, but the most important part is having a conversation as a family about what "affordable" means. How big of a factor is finances and affordability in making your list? What can your family pay per year for your education? Are there additional outside resources or savings that are planned to fund the student's education? Are there other factors or expenses to consider?

Then, identify what types of financial aid make the most sense for your family's individual situation. To determine your family's eligibility for need-based aid programs, using the [FAFSA4Caster](#). This tool will give you a prediction of what would be determined as your EFC (your estimated family contribution, the amount of money the government thinks your family can pay for college). The lower your EFC, the more need-based aid you'll be eligible for, and the more you should focus on need-based programs; the higher your EFC, the less need-based aid you'll be eligible for and the more likely you should focus on funding your education with merit-based scholarships. ****In January 2020, it was announced the term "EFC" will be phased out over the next two years and replaced with the term "Student Aid Index".**

2. **Research types of institutions that fit your unique needs.** Use some general lists to identify colleges or financial aid programs that might work for you, based upon your family's unique situation. In general, students should plan to apply to a variety of institutions, including New York State public colleges (SUNY), New York City public colleges (CUNY), and private/out-of-state public colleges. In the end, don't limit yourself, but make sure you have a sense of if the colleges you are applying to will make sense for you.
 - **Colleges that Meet 100% of Need.** [A full list of colleges that Meet 100% of Need](#). As discussed above, Colleges that Meet 100% of Need guarantee to provide enough aid (through grants, scholarships, work study, and loans) to cover the full cost of the institution. These colleges work best for students and families with lower or middle incomes; the less money your family has, the more need-based aid these colleges will provide. Usually, but not always, these colleges tend to not offer scholarships for students who don't have financial need, so they tend to be "full price" for families that don't have financial need, as determined by the FAFSA and CSS Profile. These colleges tend to be more selective, and require a strong academic background. For a full list of what % of need colleges meet, check this spreadsheet.
 - **HEOP** (read more under Opportunity Programs). [A full list is here](#). These private colleges within New York State offer full cost financial aid scholarships (including loans, usually) for

students who meet financial and academic eligibility requirements. These colleges are a great fit for students with a range of academic backgrounds from low income families.

- **SUNY.** [Our public state university system.](#) SUNY has a lower overall cost, before financial aid, for New York State residents which can make it more affordable for a range of families. Without any financial aid, a four-year SUNY costs between \$23-27,000. For families making under \$125,000/annually who qualify for the excelsior scholarship, SUNY costs \$18-22,000. With need-based aid, merit scholarships, and other programs, SUNY can cost *a lot* less (\$0-\$5,000). Students with a variety of financial situations should consider SUNY.
- **CUNY.** Out city state university system. CUNY is affordable for many families. Before financial aid is applied, the total cost of a four-year CUNY is between \$6,000-\$10,000. For low income students who qualify for federal and state aid, this aid almost always covers the full cost of CUNY (even books, transportation, etc.). For families that don't qualify for need-based aid, CUNY is still at most \$10,000 a year, which is much less than most other colleges.
- **Colleges with merit scholarships.** All students can qualify for merit scholarships, although students are usually awarded more merit aid for stronger academic performance. If you are a really strong student or if you are looking to lower the cost of college but do not qualify for need-based aid, it can be helpful to focus on colleges that will offer merit scholarships. [This database](#) shows what percent of students receive merit aid and the average merit award. Here is a [list of 50 colleges that give out the most merit aid](#) + here is a list of colleges that offer [full cost merit scholarships](#).
- **Out-of-state public colleges.** Out-of-state (non New York) public colleges tend to cost slightly less, in total, than private colleges (about \$36-67,000, versus a private, which is more like \$45-77,000). However, they tend to offer less need-based and merit aid for out-of-state students, since their focus is on students from their own state (although some work hard to recruit top students from other states - more on this below). Because of this, out-of-state public colleges tend to be best financial fits for families who do not qualify for need-based aid, because the total cost *without any aid or scholarships* is lower than the total cost of a private college *without any aid or scholarships*.
- **Out-of-state public colleges with NYS reciprocity or out-of-state merit scholarships.** Some public colleges offer programs or scholarships to recruit out-of-state students, such as tuition reciprocity (Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is one, unfortunately NYS does not have a lot of reciprocity agreements) or [out-of-state merit scholarships](#) or [Honors colleges](#) (many honors colleges come with merit awards).
- **International Colleges.** International colleges cannot provide any need-based aid for Americans and often don't provide much merit scholarship -- but they cost less in total, usually closer to \$15-25,000 a year (sometimes up to \$30-45,000). Because of this, international colleges tend to be best for families who do not qualify for need-based aid because of the low cost, without any aid or scholarships.

3. As you narrow your list, then do more in-depth research on each of the individual schools on

your list, specifically as they apply to you. To do this, follow these steps:

- College Scorecard
- Do the Net Price Calculator for **each college**.
- Research Merit or other specific scholarship programs.

Net price calculator

Although colleges often have an intimidating sticker price, what you actually pay to attend college can be a different story. The net price of a college differs from person to person because it's determined based on the student's financial situation. Many schools have a place where students can find an estimate as to what their net price for that school is, and [you can find a list of net price calculators here](#), but if you want to find a net price calculator for a specific school, then search "[college name] net price calculator" and you should be able to find a portal.