



WHEN/HOW TO APPEAL FINANCIAL AID AWARDS

Headline: You can ask colleges for more money than they offered in the initial award letter

Financial aid offers are not set in stone. In fact, since colleges are businesses, it is in their interest to offer the minimum amount of need- and merit-based financial aid that a family would accept.

You do not have to accept the first offer. In fact, you don't even need a good reason to appeal, as a college won't revoke your acceptance or reduce your aid because you asked for more money.

There are, however, certain circumstances under which your chances of a successful appeal are higher. Let's discuss those circumstances and the steps you should take for the best results.

Circumstances For An Appeal

1. **Significant Change in Financial Circumstances:** The info you submit on the FAFSA, which is used to determine your eligibility for need-based financial aid, is supposed to reflect your family's financial situation two years prior to submission. You should appeal your award if your family's finances have changed significantly since then, as a result of events that include, but are not limited to:
 - Death of a parent
 - Job loss or decrease in income
 - Divorce or separation of a student's parents
 - Unreimbursed medical or dental expenses
 - Unreimbursed dependent care costs for a child with special needs or a disability
 - Additional expenses associated with taking care of an elderly parent/relative
 - Catastrophic damage or losses due to a natural disaster or
 - End of child support, Social Security benefits for a child, or alimony payments
 - Birth of a sibling / change in the number of dependents in a household
 - Sibling/dependents attending college
 - Private school tuition for a sibling/dependent
 - Dependency override: changing a student's FAFSA status from "dependent" to "independent" in cases – e.g., lack of parental cooperation, abuse/neglect, or lack of parental contact, etc. – where the student cannot reasonably expect financial support or parental involvement
2. **Falsely Inflated Income:** Parental income is the main driver of a dependent student's SAI – meaning, the higher that a college understands the parental income to be, the lower the student's eligibility for need-based aid. There are two common instances in which parental income could be inflated, in which case an appeal is warranted:
 - **Retirement Distributions:** One-time retirement distributions can give the false impression of increased ongoing income. In this case, or in the case that a retirement account rollover was not properly reported and therefore incorrectly counted as taxable income, there is a strong case for an appeal.
 - **Tax-Deductible Business Expenses:** Colleges often don't consider business deductions that are allowed by the IRS (e.g., depreciation, business use of a vehicle, etc.) to reduce taxable income. In the college's eyes, this increases

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parental income, which reduces need-based aid eligibility. If this applies to you, it is worth it to mention in an appeal letter.

3. **Merit-Based Changes:** You can appeal the merit-based portion of your gift aid offer by providing new information which shows you are an even stronger student, leader, performer, etc. than originally assessed. This new information could include:
 - **New academic achievements:** improved ACT/SAT scores; significantly improved grades; national or regional awards
 - **New extracurricular achievements:** leadership roles; notable projects, performances, or competition results; community impact
 - **Alignment with school's mission/priorities:** student can demonstrate a deeper connection to core values or programs (e.g., research, specific departments, etc.)
 - **Institutional changes/oversights:** student was overlooked for an institutional scholarship they were eligible for, or they are eligible for a new departmental scholarship that was not initially considered
 - **Unique personal circumstances:** overcoming new barriers or challenges
4. **Dealing With a Private College:** In general, you are more likely to have a successful financial aid appeal with a private institution. With public institutions, you typically can only expect a successful appeal if you've experienced significant changes to your financial situation, and even then, an appeal is never guaranteed.
5. **Better Offer From Another School:** If you received better offers from other schools, provide those award letters to your school of choice and see if they will match it. When done in a professional, respectful manner, this is an effective way to secure more money. Some schools even explicitly state they will match offers from peer institutions as part of their merit-based aid process. That said, never use the word "negotiate" in this context.

10 Tips for a Successful Appeal

1. **Follow the school's process:** Going rogue won't help you. Look on the financial aid website or call the office to find out each school's prescribed steps.
2. **Reach out proactively:** If your FAFSA and/or CSS Profile do not accurately reflect your current finances, contact the financial aid office before they send your initial award letter.
3. **Make a specific ask:** Except in the case of a competing offer, stating and justifying the specific amount you're looking for can simplify things for the financial aid office.
4. **Have documentation ready:** Whether you are showing a competing offer or reporting a new achievement, be prepared to support all appeal claims with documentation.
5. **Appeal to the right department:** Need-based appeals go to the financial aid office, while merit-based appeals go to the admissions office.



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6. **Ask about home equity:** Though most colleges don't include home equity in their aid calculations, some do. In this case, inquire about it and ask the college to limit its impact.
7. **Tell your story/demonstrate interest:** The humans on the other side of this are more likely to give you money if they feel invested in you and believe you are invested in the school.
8. **Communicate kindly:** The humans on the other side of this will respond much better to kind, respectful, professional communication. Plus, it's just the right thing to do.
9. **Be persistent:** As long as you communicate kindly, you should have zero shame or doubt about appealing an award and following up if you don't get a response.
10. **Balance student and parent involvement:** Students generally do not know the ins and outs of family finances. If possible, parents should be involved in crafting appeals letters.

Example Appeal Letters (sent as emails)

Example #1: In this scenario, the student's grandfather experienced a health issue that led to him becoming financially dependent on the student's mother/household.

Subject: Consideration for Financial Aid Award Appeal

Dear Northern University Financial Aid Office,

My name is Lucas Spielfogel (ID# 12345) and I was recently accepted to Northern, which is my top-choice college. I am writing to thank you for the very generous financial aid offer but also to humbly request your consideration of adjusting this offer due to circumstances that have made it financially impossible for me to attend.

This past February, my grandfather suffered a severe stroke due to diabetes complications, ultimately leading to bleeding in his brain that has made it impossible for him to stand or walk without assistance. This required emergency surgery and a month-long hospital stay. I have attached physician documentation of the stroke and its long-term consequences for my grandfather's physical condition.

Afterwards, my grandfather moved in with us. Not only is he a dependent within our single-parent household, but also, the long-term care that his condition requires is not covered by Medicare or Medicaid and is now my mother's financial responsibility. This responsibility amounts to \$10,000, including medical supplies, specialized equipment, prescription drugs, and my grandfather's daily living expenses. I have attached receipts verifying these costs.

These circumstances have had further ripple effects on our financial situation. My mother has spent \$3,000 on home adjustments to accommodate my grandfather's needs, and because my mother used up her paid sick/personal leave during this process, she lost approximately \$5,000 taking unpaid leave during days she ordinarily would have been working. I have attached documentation verifying these costs and losses.

If necessary, I am prepared to take on loans to finance my college education, and I have been working 40 hours per week to save money in light of my family's dire situation. However, and respectfully, Northern's \$10,000 net price is a gap my family simply can't afford. Western University, as you can see from the attached award letter, has offered a package with a net price of \$1,000, but I know that Northern is the school for me. I know that because of my fall visit, my deep research, and the school's ability to support my dream of becoming a doctor, so that perhaps one day I could help prevent the health issues my grandfather and so many other low-income citizens face.

I appreciate your consideration with all my heart, and if you have any follow-up questions or would like additional documentation, please let me know.

Example #2: In this scenario, the student/family is explaining that the income reported on the FAFSA gives the false impression that the family's income remains that high, when really it was a one-time retirement distribution.



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The 2023 family income figures that were reported on my FAFSA do not reflect my family's current income. In 2023, my father made a one-time \$40,000 retirement distribution for two main reasons. The first was to support my older sister with her college tuition, rather than taking out a Parent Plus Loan. I have attached her financial aid award letters from her first two years of college so you can see the \$10,000 reduction in gift aid that led to the need for this retirement distribution.

Second, the roof on our 100-year-old, multigenerational home in South Louisiana had become a safety risk for our family – not only because it was so weak it could fall, but also because of the presence of mold. The one-time retirement disbursement was necessary to prevent serious health consequences as well as even more significant financial losses. I have attached multiple reports and quotes from roofing contractors, verifying this urgent problem.

Not only is my family's FAFSA-reported income not reflective of our actual income, but due to the demands I've mentioned above, we are in a far more financially constrained situation than in 2023. The discrepancy has left me with an annual net price of \$15,000, which my family cannot afford. I have attached both of my parents' 2024 tax returns to back up these claims.

You will see in the attached award letter that Western University's offer leaves me with an annual net price of \$7,000, which is much more realistic for my family. Except, Northern is the only place I wish to be my home for the next four years. It is where I wish to become the person I'm meant to be, and I promise that, if given the opportunity, I would pour my all into the Northern community.

Thank you so much for your consideration of helping make Northern a financial reality for me and my family. If you have any follow-up questions or would like additional documentation, please let me know.