



Paying for College: A Primer

By Kevin McMullin, Collegewise Founder and President

The idea of trying to pay for college can be intimidating. The potentially big bills and the seemingly complex system of applying for financial aid and scholarships can be enough to stop some families from taking the productive steps they need to take to help finance their children's educations. So here's my primer on the topic. Each of these five recommendations are important, and they'll take time and some focus to execute properly. But I've distilled them into this short list to help readers see that it's not a 100-item to-do list. A family who, along with their applicant, does just these five things will almost certainly be in a much better financial position to pay for college.

1. Start saving for college as soon as possible, preferably in a 529 savings plan.

The more you manage to save, the less you'll need to rely on financial aid. And the more control you'll have in your college destiny.

2. Become a competitive applicant.

A challenging curriculum combined with good grades and test scores can earn you more financial aid, which brings me to...

3. Apply to schools where you have a strong chance of admission, ideally those where you'd be in the top 10% of the class of incoming freshmen.

One of the best ways to get the money you need is to apply to those colleges most likely to pay. Financial aid offices earmark a certain percentage of money every year just to lure academically appealing students. Apply where you'll appeal.

4. File the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).

The FAFSA is the starting point to apply for financial aid at any college. Some colleges also require additional forms, and those will always be explained on the financial aid section of each college's website. But failing to file the FAFSA will take you out of the running for most available aid.



5. Apply for outside scholarships.

These are awards from private companies, foundations, community organizations, churches and other benefactors. I intentionally listed this last because while many families believe that scholarships are the best way to pay for college, these awards actually account for about 5% of the aid that's available. Landing comparatively small awards of a few hundred, or maybe a few thousand, dollars is worth it, especially if paying for college is a big concern. But don't ignore the other items on the list and hope that scholarships will cover the cost.

Want more expert tips from Kevin? Check out his blog at wiselikeus.com.

