

10 Steady Tips About Student Aid

1. Every student should apply for aid—regardless of family income. The financial-aid office needs the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or Fafsa, to process a loan, even for students who don't qualify for need-based aid. And, if a student's financial situation changes, the financial-aid office cannot offer aid without that form.
2. Deadlines matter. Students have to apply for aid each year, and they must do so on time. First-year students need to understand that different colleges may have different deadlines.
3. All aid applications are not the same. All colleges require the Fafsa. About 250 colleges require a CSS/Financial Aid Profile, a form that asks for more information than is included on the federal form. State grants and outside scholarships may also require additional paperwork.
4. Students should know what colleges mean by "family contribution." This figure is what a college determines a family can contribute based on the Fafsa, sometimes combined with information from a CSS/Financial Aid Profile. The dollar amount is not necessarily what the family will pay, since students don't all spend the same amount of money on items like housing. It could also vary from college to college. For example, some financial-aid offices will add in an expected contribution from a student's summer earnings.
5. Students should be aware of what is included in the cost of attendance. This figure includes tuition, fees, housing, and indirect costs like books, supplies, and transportation. The actual cost paid for some of these items will vary from student to student.
6. Eligibility and need aren't always the same. If a student meets the criteria for a federal Pell Grant, the college has to award it. But the college may determine that a student who is eligible for a Pell Grant on paper doesn't demonstrate the level of need to get other institutional need-based aid.
7. There is a big difference between need-based and merit aid. Merit aid is almost always tied to academic performance, and some is tied to specific criteria like having a certain major or being from a certain part of the country. Need-based aid is determined solely from families' documented financial situations.
8. There are different forms of aid. Students can receive federal, state, and institutional aid. Aid can come in the form of grants, loans, or work. And yes, financial-aid offices view loans as a form of aid.
9. Award letters vary. Be sure to note whether aid is in the form of grants or loans and whether it is renewable from year to year.
10. Award letters can be appealed. If a family knows or expects its financial situation will change, it should talk it over with the financial-aid office. Most offices can help a family with special circumstances—an issue many expect to see happen more in a year like this one.

Source: Arlina DeNardo, director of financial aid at Lafayette College, and Carolyn Lindley, director of financial aid at Northwestern University