

# COLLEGE AID SPECIALISTS



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## “Your Month-by-Month Primer For Reducing College Expenses!”

These deliciously carefree summer days and nights have a tendency to mask the fact that this coming school year will be a little more stressful for your entire family... especially if you have a college-bound junior or senior in the family!

Obviously, there will be the ordeal of standardized tests and studying hard to make the grade – all in an attempt to earn admission into one of his/her most preferred university or college. Somewhat less apparent for many folks, at least initially, are the days and nights of concern regarding college costs! The sad fact is that every year there are hard-working students who are admitted to prestigious schools, only to find out that their family is unable to meet the costs of attendance! That dreadful possibility hangs over the head of parents around the country.

However, families do not *have* to find themselves in that untenable position. Just by taking the time to fully grasp the college funding process, and taking the right steps at the right times, most parents are able to cover college expenses for wherever their child is admitted.

We are committed to helping you through this coming year, and are pleased to offer you this College Funding Calendar. Follow it, and you will have no doubts as to what needs to be completed (and when) during the school year! Of course, we know things get hectic, so we will drop you a reminder each month. However, we recommend that you hold on to this calendar! It allows you to plan ahead and avoid missing deadlines or important milestones along the way...

## SEPTEMBER

First things first... from now through the start of the school year, it's time to investigate your child's college options. Through visits and the internet, gather brochures and application forms for potential schools which interest your child. We recommend a list of *at least* six schools. Remember that two of these should be “safety schools” with two important elements: 1) you know they will accept your child, and 2) they are within your budget. In addition, your list should include

a “stretch school,” perhaps one a bit more prestigious than the rest. Yes, there is a cost affiliated with college application, but it is a vital step! The more institutions that accept your child, better the future will look for your family... both for the schools and overall expense!

This is not a balanced system for expenses. Your Expected Family Contribution (EFC) won't be the same as everyone else's because it's directly linked to finances. Arrange your finances so that they will drop that EFC as low as it can possibly go, considering your income.

Most people don't know how to do that right now; that's rather specialized knowledge akin to maximizing returns on your annual taxes. It turns out that there are a number of strategies that can lower college expenses dramatically. Just as wise taxpayers consult with their accountant before submitting anything to the IRS, all college funding forms should be reviewed by a college funding specialist.

### **OCTOBER**

If we could call September “Research Month,” then October is definitely “Action Month!” This is the time to fill out applications (*always* double-check for mistakes!), and then submit them *as early as you possibly can*. The next action is all up to the student, as it's now time to sit for the ACT/SAT (or the PSAT, if s/he is a high school junior).

These exams are actually crucial for two reasons. In addition to better scores equating to better college admission options, they also open the door to better financial aid packages from the schools! With those two benefits in mind, preparation for the ACT/SAT makes more sense than ever... it'll help your child get into a better college, *and* it will aid things on the financial front!

October is also a fine time to begin investigating private scholarships if your student is a high school junior (It's probably too late if they are a senior!). Bear in mind, however, that private scholarships don't tend to cover all college fees by any stretch of the imagination — private awards are usually much smaller and somewhat rare. Still, every bit helps, so remember that private deadlines tend to be early, and now is the best time to apply.

### **NOVEMBER**

The first major deadline of the college application season hits this month, so it's wise to be prepared. At the end of this month, the Free Application For Student Aid (FAFSA) will be available – again, pic it up as early as possible! *Early* is key, since financial aid is awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. The fact is, later filing means lower chances for an award.

Your child's school counselor's office will have the FAFSA, and the CSS Financial Aid Profile Registration Form (usually used by private institutions) is available on-line at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com). Private schools may have a deadline earlier than the FAFSA deadline, so do not delay! We also recommend asking the schools directly if they need more information. Some schools have their own forms, which may also have different deadlines.

### **DECEMBER**

Speaking of deadlines, there are two enormous ones that hit the parents of seniors this month. The first deadline is the end of your Base Financial Year, so all financial planning needs to be settled by the end of December! Assets which are not optimally situated as the calendar year ends can actually raise the EFC by thousands of dollars – sometimes beyond what people can

afford. Although it could be possible to lower that figure for the next year, that first year can really force people to take it on the chin... plan now to avoid an unnecessarily higher EFC.

The second of the big December deadlines is for collecting all the necessary information used to fill out the rest of that FAFSA form. Make it a point to be ready to send or electronically file your FAFSA in at the earliest possible date (January 1<sup>st</sup>). Do so even if you're still missing some information... you'll have a chance to update the FAFSA later, but it's crucial to get it sent the first of January!

### **JANUARY**

Yes, New Year's Day is the "priority filing date" for the FAFSA. Sure, you *can* send it, or file it, any time after January 1<sup>st</sup>... but that doesn't mean it's a good idea! File it as soon as possible. Amazingly, the *most common reason* that families miss out on financial aid is something as simple as ignoring deadlines and filing dates! People procrastinate, and it ends up costing them very dearly in their payments for college. It's very easy to put these forms off from January to a later month, but please don't be one of the tardy masses! It's invariably a very expensive mistake. You'll save a ton of money by being ready to file your FAFSA early in January.

Of course, if your child is only entering the junior year this fall, then you have just *begun* your base financial year! That is a huge advantage, because it gives you twelve months to arrange the finances that are used to calculate your need. This gives you some time to work with, and we recommend using it by preparing for the coming college application crush by listing college options with your child, gathering brochures and information, and narrowing your focus down to the actual application list. Starting now will bring you all a smoother senior year.

### **FEBRUARY**

As you know from the paragraphs above, the FAFSA should be in by now. With that in place, February should bring the results, since the processing time runs six to eight weeks. You'll receive the Student Aid Report (SAR), which includes an estimate of your EFC. If you filed via the internet you will have your SAR within a couple of days.

The first thing you should do is review your SAR to determine that the numbers are accurate. You can also make changes to your income and tax details, if necessary, because Part II of the SAR is designed for changes. In addition, if considering private scholarships, there could be additional deadlines in the coming month. You'll need to submit those forms now.

### **MARCH**

After all of the stress of the school year, finally there is an easier month to catch your breath. Bear in mind that things won't stay calm for long! In the event that there were corrections to your original SAR, another new report will come to you after four to six weeks, unless you corrected over the internet, you will have sooner. Check the new one carefully, too, and send a copy directly to the schools your child is applying to.

### **APRIL**

April is one of the biggest months of a senior's life, as the results finally arrive! The overwhelming work and preparation are over, and the letters from the colleges and universities finally help everything fall into place. The letters offer two crucial pieces of information: an admission offer or a refusal, and the amount of money offered by the school for tuition and fees.

Past experience dictates that seeing the amount you're expected to pay gives most people a really good jolt! One strategy we employ is encouraging you to take a deep breath and possibly accept every offer of admission for your child, even the expensive ones. At this point there is plenty of time to negotiate, and you are not locked in to attend any of the schools yet!

### **MAY**

Speaking of negotiations with the schools, May is the month for much of that activity. You may find that once the schools are convinced that your child has something special to offer the incoming freshman class, they may lower the fees. This can especially be effective if your child is considering going elsewhere to school – or if the colleges believe that is a possibility!

We recommend communicating directly with any schools who made financial offers which were less generous than the others. In a letter, simply tell them that other colleges have made better offers, and draw attention to your child's special skills and abilities. There is no need to blatantly ask for more money, nor is it time to threaten to go elsewhere. Simply mention that their financial offer seems comparatively low, and request a second look. This can also happen with a phone call to the financial aid officer, as well. Finally, once the negotiation period is past, it will be time to sit down with your child to make the big decision, as well as apply for housing.

For juniors, May is an ideal month to visit college campuses and continue research.

### **JUNE/JULY/AUGUST**

After high school graduation you will again find yourselves in the summer – but looking forward to the first year of their college experience. Even with the most diligent work to keep school payments low, the fact is that most people are looking at a very overwhelming bill that can really put a crimp in a family's lifestyle.

The cost of higher education is going through the roof, and meeting expenses is difficult. The good news is that it's not impossible... and it needn't be uncomfortable. With solid financial planning and advice, the issue of money can be removed from your child's college choice!

Best wishes,

**Steve Buller   Jo Ann Bray   Todd Bennett**