Saving for college and financial aid options

Paying for college may be a challenge given the rising costs of tuition. Below, you’ll find tips for saving for college, as well as financial aid options if savings aren’t enough to cover the cost.

Ways to save

529 plans
A Section 529 plan is an education savings plan sponsored by a state and operated by a state, educational or financial institution, designed to help families set aside funds for education costs. In the same way a 401(k) or Roth IRA is designed to offer tax advantages to help you save for retirement, 529 plans were created to help save for college education. As of January 1, 2018, for federal tax purposes, “education” includes elementary and high school tuition, not just postsecondary education. Please note: not all states have adopted this definition.

Although 529 plan contributions are not deductible on your federal tax return, your investment can grow tax deferred, and distributions to pay for qualified education expenses for the named beneficiary come out free of federal income tax. In addition to the federal tax savings, more than 30 states currently offer a full or partial tax deduction or credit for 529 plan contributions. Be sure to research all of your options.

529 plans offer additional benefits beyond tax breaks. Unlike a UGMA/UTMA, where the child takes control of assets once legal age is reached, the 529 account owner maintains control of the account. There are also no income, age or annual contribution limits for 529 plans unlike Roth IRAs or Coverdell Education Savings Accounts (there are lifetime contribution limits for 529, which vary by plan and state, ranging from $235,000 to over $500,000).

Qualified education expenses

- Tuition—Tuition is a qualified expense for both full- and part-time students at any accredited university, college or vocational school nationwide, and many abroad. To be accredited simply means the institution has passed standards set by a reviewing committee. While the majority of colleges are accredited, be sure to ask the financial aid office ahead of time.

- Room and board—If the student is attending school half time or more, and the room and board are paid directly to the institution, this is a qualified expense.

  For students living off campus, the amount of room and board expenses that may be treated as a qualified expense is generally limited to the room and board allowance included by the eligible educational institution in its “cost of attendance” for purposes of determining eligibility for federal education assistance for that year.

- Books and supplies—Books and supplies are qualified expenses, but only the ones that are required.

- Computers and related technology expenses

- K-12 school tuition, up to $10,000 annually per student from all 529 plans.1

If you withdraw 529 plan funds and do not use them for qualified education expenses, there is a 10% penalty, and federal income taxes are due on the investment earnings. There are exceptions to the 10% penalty, such as death, disability or receipt of a scholarship, but taxes on the growth will still be due. You can also transfer the funds to another family member, which allows for flexibility if the intended beneficiary does not use the funds.2

Estate tax planning benefits
A contribution to a 529 plan is a gift. You can pay gift taxes, use your lifetime exemption, or if you’ve given one person no more than $15,000, use your annual gift tax exclusion. 529 plans offer the added benefit of being able to pre-use up to five years of the annual exclusion amount. This means you can give $75,000 in year one to a 529 plan for a beneficiary using year one’s annual gift tax exclusion of $15,000, and the next four years’ worth of annual gift tax exclusions. If you pass away within this five-year period, however, a portion of these gifts may be includable in your estate for federal income tax purposes. Speak with your tax advisor for details regarding your situation.
529 plans funded by grandparents
Many grandparents report that they think it is important to help pay for their grandchildren’s college education.

The value of assets owned by a grandparent (or other nonparent) is not reportable on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) financial aid application. This rule extends to 529 plans owned by grandparents.

However, if a grandparent provides any type of financial support to the student, that support is reportable on the following year’s FAFSA as student income. The financial aid formula counts student income just as it counts student assets (although the assessment percentages and allowances are different). Most financial aid offices interpret the rules as requiring distributions from grandparent-owned 529 plans to be included as student income, even when the distributions are not reportable for federal income taxes (i.e., they are tax free).

Structuring your 529 investment
Opening separate 529 accounts for your grandchildren is a good idea for several reasons:

1. You can tailor the selection of the 529 plan and investment options within that plan for each grandchild. For example, let’s assume your grandchildren are located in different states. It could make sense to use the 529 plan in the state where the grandchild lives if there are special state tax breaks for withdrawals from the in-state 529 plan, or if the state provides preferable treatment to residents in its own 529 plan when awarding state grants.

2. You can maintain separate 529 accounts to keep your intentions clear. If something were to happen to you, and all the funds you set aside to help all your grandchildren are in the name of just one grandchild, your children could face a difficult time attempting to resolve the ultimate disposition of the 529 funds. With separate accounts, you can easily name the appropriate successor on each account, and eliminate any confusion or discord in the event you die or become disabled.

If the parent of your grandchild has an established 529 plan that accepts third-party contributions, you can contribute to that plan in lieu of opening a new account. Keep in mind, however, the effect that ownership has on a student’s financial aid. Also keep in mind that the IRS has not yet indicated whether a contribution you make to a 529 account owned by someone else will be treated as two gifts, the first from you to the account owner, and the second from the account owner to the beneficiary. This is especially important if you want to take advantage of the special gifting rule for 529 plans that allows you to gift up to $75,000 and elect to have it treated as advancement against your five-year annual gift tax exemption. Consult a tax advisor regarding your plans.

The Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act
The ABLE Act, which was signed into law in 2014, allows Americans who are living with disabilities to save money for college and other expenses in a tax-deferred account as a supplement to private insurance and public benefits.

529A ABLE accounts
Similar to a 529 college savings plan, 529A savings accounts are administered by states. Money can be withdrawn tax free when the funds are used to pay for qualified disability expenses, including education, job training and support, healthcare and financial management. The maximum annual contribution for 2020 is $15,000 (the amount of the annual gift tax exclusion).

Be sure to understand the impact of the balance of the ABLE account on benefits such as Social Security Income (SSI), which will be reduced if the balance exceeds $100,000. You should also review whether the state paying any other benefits will seek estate recovery after the death of the account owner that received such benefits.

Why 529A accounts are so important
Prior to the ABLE Act, if a person with a disability earned more than $700 per month, or had savings or other assets in excess of $2,000, they risked having certain means-tested benefits suspended. The only way families could get around this was to set up a special needs trust, which is often very costly.

Eligibility
To qualify for a 529A account, individuals must have been diagnosed with a significant disability expected to last at least 12 consecutive months before they turned 26 years old. The individual must also receive benefits under SSI and/or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), or be able to obtain a disability certification from a doctor.

Parents who have saved money in a 529 college savings account may be able to roll the funds into a 529A account in the event the beneficiary is later diagnosed with a disability. State tax treatment varies.

Coverdell Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)
These accounts work very much like a 529 plan, offering tax-free investment growth opportunity and tax-free withdrawals when the funds are spent on qualified education expenses. Coverdell ESAs can be used to pay for qualified elementary and secondary expenses.
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This includes not only tuition at an eligible K-12 school, but also books, supplies, equipment, academic tutoring and special needs services (tax-free withdrawals from 529 plans are limited to K-12 tuition).

Unlike 529 plans, ESAs are subject to both annual income and contribution limits. If your modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) is less than $110,000 ($220,000 if filing a joint return), you may be able to establish a Coverdell ESA to finance the qualified education expenses of a designated beneficiary. For most taxpayers, MAGI is the adjusted gross income as figured on their federal income tax return.

There is no limit on the number of separate Coverdell ESAs that can be established for a designated beneficiary. However, total contributions for the beneficiary in any year can’t be more than $2,000, no matter how many accounts have been established.

Example: When Maria Luna was born in 2019, three separate Coverdell ESAs were set up for her, one by her parents, one by her grandfather and one by her aunt. In 2020, the total of all contributions to Maria’s three Coverdell ESAs can’t be more than $2,000. For example, if her grandfather contributed $2,000 to one of her Coverdell ESAs, no one else could contribute to any of her three accounts. Or, if her parents contributed $1,000 and her aunt $600, her grandfather or someone else could contribute no more than $400. These contributions could be put into any of Maria’s Coverdell ESA accounts.

The low contribution limit and income limitations may make the Coverdell ESAs less appealing. Plus, now that 529 plans allow withdrawals for elementary and high school tuition expenses, they may be much more appealing. Families who are currently saving with a Coverdell ESA and want to switch to a 529 plan can do a rollover with no tax consequences.

Financial aid
Nearly every student is eligible for some form of assistance. Federal aid comes in many forms. The four most common types of aid offered from the federal government are:

- **Pell Grant**—A needs-based grant of up to $6,195 reserved for students of families with lower incomes that may equate to a low expected family contribution (EFC) rate.

- **Stafford Loan for undergraduate students (subsidized)**—For loans disbursed between July 1, 2019 and July 1, 2020, any federal direct subsidized loan will have a fixed interest rate of 4.53%, and the interest is paid by the government while the student is enrolled at least half time. The federal direct unsubsidized loan also has a fixed interest rate of 4.53% and accumulates interest on the outstanding balance.

- **Federal Perkins Loan**—A loan that is like the Stafford but is loaned directly by schools that are Title IV eligible. The interest rate is fixed at 5%.

- **Federal Work-Study Program**—A program where students can get part-time work, up to a certain amount. In most cases, the federal government pays half of a student’s wage and the school pays the other half.

- **Stafford Loan (unsubsidized)**—Students who may not be eligible for need-based aid may still be eligible for an unsubsidized Stafford Loan regardless of income or circumstances. An unsubsidized Stafford Loan is a federally guaranteed student loan that is not based on financial need. For unsubsidized student loans, interest accrues from the time the loan is disbursed to the school. This is the key difference between subsidized and unsubsidized student loans.

Eligibility
To determine if you are eligible, schools generally use a formula to determine the EFC.

Expected family contribution
Colleges use various methods to determine whether a prospective student is eligible for any need-based aid. Under each methodology, eligibility is based on the following formula: Cost of Attendance – Expected Family Contribution = Need.

It’s important to discover as early as possible how savings, investments, retirement accounts, 529 college plans and income affect eligibility. To do so, you will need to determine:

1. Which colleges use which aid forms and formulas
2. How your family’s finances will be assessed under each formula and, therefore, at each college
3. If the income of a parent will disqualify a child for need-based aid regardless of the amount and type of assets or who owns them

Application process (the FAFSA and CSS Profile)
The process of applying for need-based financial aid for college begins by students and parents completing one or two financial aid forms, the FAFSA and/or the College Scholarship Service (CSS) Profile.

Any college or university that awards federal student aid must require that students complete the FAFSA in order to determine eligibility for federal aid (it works for most state aid, too). Most colleges and universities nationwide use the FAFSA as their sole application for need-based financial aid. Students applying for aid at those colleges only need to complete the FAFSA.
However, there are about 300 colleges that require the CSS Profile to be completed in addition to the FAFSA. Those colleges use the CSS Profile to assess the student’s eligibility for their own institutional aid dollars.

Typically, “Profile” colleges are very selective private colleges, but the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are examples of flagship state universities that require the Profile, not just the FAFSA.

There is also a group of 28 colleges that make up what is known as the 568 Presidents’ Group, which was formed by the presidents of those institutions for the purpose of assessing students’ ability to pay for college using a “consensus” methodology. The 568 Presidents’ Group schools also require students to complete the CSS Profile, but they treat students’ assets and parents’ home equity different (more favorable to families) than the institutional methodology. Thus, there are two financial aid forms but three methodologies of calculating a student’s EFC.

Next steps
Being educated on the financial aid process is necessary as education costs continue to rise. Your TIAA advisor can help you examine these and other costs in an analysis of your life goals.

Helpful websites to learn more about financial aid and college savings:
- TIAA.org/public/offer/products/529-educational-savings
- bigfuture.collegeboard.org/pay-for-college/paying-your-share/expected-family-contribution-calculator
- fafsa.ed.gov
- finaid.org
- ablenrc.org
- collegesavings.org

There are also private loans that may be available to students. These loans can be obtained through banks, Sallie Mae or online. Generally, private loans are more expensive and have higher interest rates, so you may want to consider federal student aid first.

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1 Some states do not fully conform with the federal laws regarding distributions for K-12 tuition. Distributions used to pay for K-12 tuition may be considered nonqualified and the earnings portion of the withdrawal is subject to state income tax. In addition, nonconforming states offering a state income tax deduction for 529 plan contributions may impose a recapture if funds are withdrawn to pay for K-12 tuition.
2 See the plan’s disclosure booklet for allowable family members.

Examples included herein, if any, are hypothetical and for illustrative purposes only.

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Most states offer a 529 college savings plan. Before investing, check your state’s website for information about any favorable state tax benefits that are only available if you invest in that state’s plan.

Consider the investment objectives, risks, charges, and expenses before investing in a state 529 college savings plan. Carefully read the Disclosure Booklet available on each state’s site, or call us at 888-381-8283. Investments in a state 529 college savings plan are neither insured nor guaranteed and there is risk of investment loss.

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