K12 ACADEMICS — REFERENCE SERIES

Paying for College

The Complete Playbook

From the FAFSA to your final decision — a step-by-step guide to grants, loans, scholarships & getting the best deal.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

ABOUT K12 ACADEMICS

The world's largest education resource.

Online since 2004, K12 Academics has helped millions of families, students and educators **find the right school, college, camp, business and program in their community** — a search engine, a community, and a resource in one.

THE BIG SECRET

Almost no one pays a college's sticker price. Between grants, scholarships, and aid, the **net price** is often dramatically lower — but only families who know the system capture it. This playbook is that system, in ten steps.

General guidance, not financial advice. Aid programs, amounts, and deadlines change and vary by school and state — always confirm current details with the college's financial-aid office and studentaid.gov.

1

STEP 01 OF 10

Know What It Really Costs

WHAT IT IS

A college's **Cost of Attendance (COA)** is more than tuition — it includes fees, room, board, books, and living expenses. And the **sticker price is rarely what families actually pay**.

YOUR MOVE

Run each college's **Net Price Calculator** (on its website) for a personalized estimate before you fall in love with a number.

2

STEP 02 OF 10

File the FAFSA – Early

WHAT IT IS

The **Free Application for Federal Student Aid** is the gateway to federal, most state, and most college aid. It opens each **October 1** for the following school year, and it is free.

YOUR MOVE

File as soon as it opens — some aid is first-come, first-served, and many state and college deadlines fall long before the federal one.

3

STEP 03 OF 10

Understand Your SAI

WHAT IT IS

The FAFSA produces your **Student Aid Index (SAI)** — the number (which replaced the old EFC) that colleges use to build your aid package. A lower SAI generally means more need-based aid.

YOUR MOVE

Don’t assume you won’t qualify — file anyway. The SAI also unlocks federal loans and work-study regardless of income.

4

STEP 04 OF 10

Check for the CSS Profile

WHAT IT IS

Some colleges — mostly private ones — also require the **CSS Profile** to award their own institutional aid. It asks for more detail than the FAFSA.

YOUR MOVE

Check each college's aid page for whether it needs the CSS Profile, and note its (often earlier) deadline.

5

STEP 05 OF 10

Know the Four Kinds of Aid

WHAT IT IS

Aid comes in four flavors: **grants** and **scholarships** (free money you keep), **work-study** (money you earn), and **loans** (money you repay with interest).

YOUR MOVE

Prioritize free money first, work-study second, and borrow only what you truly need — in that order.

6

STEP 06 OF 10

Federal Grants & Loans

WHAT IT IS

The **Pell Grant** is need-based free money. **Direct Subsidized** loans (need-based, no interest while enrolled) and **Unsubsidized** loans come next; **Parent PLUS** loans are a last federal option.

YOUR MOVE

Always exhaust **federal** loans before private ones — they carry fixed rates, income-driven repayment, and forgiveness options private loans don't.

7

STEP 07 OF 10

Hunt for Scholarships

WHAT IT IS

Beyond college aid, there are thousands of **merit**, **need-based**, and **outside/private** scholarships from employers, foundations, and community groups.

YOUR MOVE

Apply widely and early; many small awards add up, and local scholarships have far less competition than national ones.

8

STEP 08 OF 10

Compare Your Offers Carefully

WHAT IT IS

Award letters are easy to misread. The number that matters is the **net price** — total cost minus **grants and scholarships** (the free money), not minus loans.

YOUR MOVE

Line offers up side by side, separate gift aid from loans, and compare the **true out-of-pocket** cost of each.

9

STEP 09 OF 10

Appeal If Your Situation Changes

WHAT IT IS

Aid offers aren't always final. If your family faces **job loss, medical bills, or other special circumstances** — or you have a stronger competing offer — you can ask for more.

YOUR MOVE

Contact the financial-aid office and request a **professional-judgment review** or appeal, in writing, with documentation.

10 STEP 10 OF 10

Start Saving Early with a 529

WHAT IT IS

A **529 plan** is a tax-advantaged account for education savings — earnings grow tax-free when used for qualified costs. Time in the market matters more than the amount.

YOUR MOVE

Open one whenever you can, even with small automatic contributions — starting early beats saving large amounts late.

KEEP THIS HANDY

The Aid Calendar

October 1	FAFSA opens for the next school year — file as early as you can.
Fall of senior year	College application deadlines (many Early Action/Decision in Nov).
Winter	CSS Profile & college/state aid deadlines — often earlier than the federal FAFSA date.
Spring	Award letters arrive; compare offers by net price.
~May 1	National College Decision Day — deposit at your chosen school.
June 30	Final federal FAFSA deadline for the year (but don't wait this long).

The golden rule: apply **early** at every step. Much aid is first-come, first-served, and the biggest mistakes are missed deadlines.

FUND THE FUTURE

Find Your Community.

Go deeper on every step — FAFSA guides, scholarship search, state aid programs & net-price calculators — among **1,297 free guides** at our resource library.

tools.k12academics.com →

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