

5.7.1.3: Understanding College Costs

The cost of college can include a variety of items including some you might not expect. By understanding college costs, you can compare schools and explore options for how to lower your costs.

[What is included in the cost of college?](#)

[How can I lower the cost of college?](#)

[How can I compare the costs of colleges?](#)

What is included in the cost of college?

College costs include more than tuition and *room and board*. Here are common costs:

Item	Description
Tuition	The cost of taking courses. Course costs vary by school.
Room and board	Lodging and food costs vary by school.
Books and school supplies	Books can be expensive. School supplies include <ul style="list-style-type: none">• book bags;• notebooks;• pens and pencils;• paper and computer paper; and• desk accessories such as folders, trays, and pen holders.
Fees	Fees depend upon your school. Examples include activity fees and parking decal fees. Schools can provide a list of fees.
Equipment and room materials	This category might include <ul style="list-style-type: none">• a computer and printer;• reading lamps;• a microwave and refrigerator; and• sheets, towels, etc.
Travel and miscellaneous expenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you commute to school, include transportation costs.• If you live on campus, include travel during school breaks.• You may also want to include clothing and mobile phone costs.

Make sure colleges and career schools give you a clear statement of their tuition and fees.

How can I lower the cost of college?

Here are some suggestions on how you might be able to lower the cost of college. For many of these suggestions, you'll want to follow up with the colleges or career schools you are interested in to get additional details.

- Set a *budget* and stick to it! Having a budget will help you compare anticipated college or career school expenses against your potential available income and financial aid. You also can use a budget to compare costs between different schools. Learn about budgeting.
- College or career school costs can vary significantly and there are many schools with affordable tuition and generous financial assistance. Make sure to research all schools that may meet your academic and financial needs. To find colleges or career schools, [use our college search tool](#), *College Navigator*.
- You may be able to get school credit based on your knowledge or life experiences, and you can manage your course work to reduce costs.

- Ask your school whether it's possible to "test out of" any classes. If you don't take a class, you may not have to pay for the credits.
- Some colleges give credit for life experiences, thereby reducing the number of credits needed for graduation.
- Most schools charge a set price for a specific number of credits taken in a semester. If academically possible, take the maximum number of credits allowed. This strategy reduces the amount of time needed to graduate.
- Some schools offer combined degree programs or three-year programs that allow you to take all of the courses needed for graduation in three years, instead of four, thereby eliminating one year's educational expenses.
- Colleges and career schools may offer discounts on tuition if
 - you are a child of an alumnus or alumna (i.e., if your parent went to the school);
 - more than one family member is enrolled at the school;
 - you are a student government leader or the editor of the college newspaper or yearbook;
 - you are an older student;
 - your family's main wage earner is unemployed; or
 - you or a member of your family works at the school.
- Housing costs can add up. Here are some tips for reducing your housing costs:
 - If you go to a college or career school near home, consider living with your parents or other family.
 - If you live off-campus, consider sharing a house or apartment with multiple housemates to cut down the cost of rent, and carpool to save on gas and parking.
 - Most colleges and universities sponsor resident advisor programs that offer reduced tuition or reduced room and board costs if you work in a residence hall.
- You may be eligible for health care benefits including the following:
 - Most young adults can stay on their parents' family plan until they turn 26, even if they are married or still living with their parents.
 - If you have been uninsured because of a pre-existing condition, you may be eligible to join the Pre-Existing Condition Insurance Plan.
 - If you are in a new insurance plan, insurance companies cannot charge you a deductible or copays for recommended or preventive services such as flu shots or other immunizations.
- You can work part-time to pay part of your costs. Be sure your work and school schedules don't conflict and that you have enough time for studying. Here are a couple of options:
 - The Federal Work-Study Program provides an opportunity to earn money while going to school. Ask schools if they participate in the program.
 - Cooperative education programs allow students to alternate between working full-time and studying full-time.
 - Most schools have placement offices that help students find employment and personnel offices that hire students to work on campus.
- Taking small steps can add up. For example, you can lower the cost of textbooks if you buy used books or rent textbooks (if you won't need the books once you finish the class).

A credit card can help you build a credit history, if you use it wisely. But use it for emergencies only and don't spend more than you can afford to pay. If you decide to get a credit card, make sure you understand the terms.

How can I compare the costs of colleges?

You can find information about whether the cost of a college is low, medium, or high by using the [College Scorecard](#). Keep in mind that a higher-priced school might have more financial aid available to help you pay for your education, so take a look at the school's net price if you want an idea of how much it might cost you after financial aid is taken into account.

Quick Links

- [Applying to Schools](#)
- [Taking Required Tests](#)
- [Types of Aid](#)
- [Things to Consider](#)

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Glossary

Room and Board

An allowance for the cost of housing and food while attending college or career school.

Budget

A financial plan that helps you track your money, make informed spending decisions, and plan for your financial goals.

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