

When it comes to deciphering financial aid packages, students are faced with a unique challenge: every university presents their financial aid package differently, making it difficult for students to understand what is or isn't included and what might change from year to year.

So what can you do to make sure colleges are being transparent about their costs? With the right questions, you can uncover a school's true price of a degree and avoid being blindsided by potentially costly majors, hidden fees, and unpredictable tuition inflation.

1. Will the net tuition (the amount a family pays) stay the same each year?

Most schools—even some with tuition plans—increase tuition each year. Over four years, this can easily add another \$12,500 to your tuition. Find out if your college has a fixed net tuition plan, meaning your tuition stays the same each year. If there isn't a fixed net tuition plan, find out if there is a limit to how much tuition will increase each year.

Related: [How Do College Net Price Calculators Work?](#)

2. Are scholarships and grants guaranteed for all four years?

Many schools offer impressive financial aid awards but don't clarify that some scholarships only apply to the first year or the award values may decrease over time. Find out if the college guarantees scholarships and grants each year, and if the award values will stay the same, decrease, or increase over time. If tuition increases, make sure your awards will also increase by the same amount to offset the cost.

3. Are there any fees or surcharges?

At first glance, the application fee doesn't seem *too bad*—just a nominal amount to process paperwork. But once you're on campus, it can turn into mandatory fees for matriculation, orientation, labs, printing, gym access, parking, and even graduation. Hidden fees and surcharges can easily amount to an additional \$20,000 over four years at some schools.

Maybe you thought you loved Math, but now you really want to study Psychology. Changing majors? That could cost you. Or maybe you discover you love Math *and* Psychology. Want to double-major or add a minor? At some schools, you have to pay for that.

Find out if your school can guarantee no additional fees—hidden or otherwise. If not, ask the financial aid office for a list of all possible fees and surcharges so you know the prices upfront.

4. Are scholarships provided to help cover other costs?

Outside of tuition, other costs of a college education can add up quickly. Textbooks, for example, are a necessary expense that students often forget in their budget. In fact, many students have reported the cost of renting or buying textbooks has led them to skip buying books altogether, inhibiting a student's ability to earn passing grades. Textbook costs can dissuade students from taking certain courses, making it difficult to meet graduation requirements. And if students drop or withdraw from courses, the high costs of textbooks may delay a student's time to graduation. When you're considering schools, find out if they offer additional scholarships to help offset the costs of extra expenses like textbooks.

Related: [Search for scholarships on CollegeXpress](#)

5. What is the four-year graduation rate?

While you may plan to earn a college degree in four years, the graduation rate many schools boast is actually their five-year—or even six-year—graduation rate. When evaluating schools, make sure to ask them for their four-year graduation rate to see your likelihood to graduate on time.

The four-year rate is important because studying for an additional semester means another semester of tuition, housing costs, and book costs. And scholarships might not extend to a fifth or sixth year. It also means delaying the time you could be earning income from employment and repaying student loans.

Related: [Top Questions to Ask College Admission Counselors](#)

6. What is the student loan default rate?

Understanding a school's student loan default rate will give you a sense of how easily students are able to pay back the loans they take out for college. Nationally, the latest data from the US Department of Education shows the average default rate is 7% for students who attended four-year private institutions and 7.5% for students who attended four-year public institutions.

What does it all mean? Schools with high default rates had more students who were unable to pay back their loans on time. In general, the lower the school's rate, the better for you. A lower rate may indicate students from a particular school receive more of their financial aid in the form of grants and scholarships that don't have to be paid back, have manageable loans, and are gainfully employed following graduation.

Find more money-smart advice in our [Financial Aid](#) section.

Note: Did you know you could win a **\$10,000 scholarship** for college or grad school just by registering on CollegeXpress? This is one of the quickest, easiest scholarships you'll ever apply for. [Register Now »](#)
