



Smart Money

Department of Education website can help you get your college financial aid ducks in a row

It's no secret that earning a college degree gives people more job opportunities and earning potential throughout their lives.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2012, a person with a bachelor's degree earned on average \$30,000 more per year than someone with just a high school diploma. Also, the unemployment rate for college graduates was 4.9 percent compared to 9.4 percent for high school graduates. Completion of master's, doctoral and professional degrees translates into even higher earnings and lower unemployment rates.

As a father of a student about to enter her senior year in high school, this data takes on added significance for me. We've talked about her goals, she's taken the SAT test, and we even visited some colleges already. But now it's time to start the daunting process of applying to schools and for financial aid.

Time to take action

While most of the deadlines for financial aid and school applications are after the first of the year, you want to start getting organized

Sites for finding colleges and financial aid

studentaid.ed.gov: This U.S. Department of Education website is an excellent place to begin educating yourself on how to pay for college.

collegecost.ed.gov: Also from the Department of Education, this website has links to college scorecards, cost calculators and other online tools to help you pick a school.

www.finaid.org: This site bills itself as a public service. It's free to use and has a lot of the same information as the Department of Education's site, as well as links to many other resources. The site also carries publications for sale.

www.fastweb.com: This site is affiliated with finaid.org. You can register for free and fill out a profile that the site uses to match you with potential scholarships.

School websites: Don't forget to investigate the websites of schools to which you are interested in applying. Most of the sites provide lots of useful information.

in the fall. If you, or your student, will be writing essays for acceptance to a school, or for scholarships, you don't want to wait until the last minute.

There are so many websites dedicated to researching colleges and financial aid, not to mention the information-packed websites of schools you're interested in, that it's hard to know where to start.

The U.S. Department of Education has an excellent site to help you begin your research at **StudentAid.ed.gov**. The website is a cleanly designed, well-organized primer that explains the entire process and contains many good resources. The home page is divided into

five sections designed to take you through the process of picking a school and securing financial aid in a logical order:

1. Prepare for College — This section begins with an explanation of why higher education is a good idea. It contains subsections with information on choosing a career, academic and financial checklists, choosing a school, college prep tests, applying to schools and finding help. Each subsection contains links to more information and other resources.

2. Types of Aid — Different types of financial aid — grants, scholarships, loans, work-study — are explained. Numerous

links take you to more in-depth information.

3. Who Gets Aid — The criteria for receiving aid are explained, terms are defined and links to more information are provided. It turns out most people will be eligible for some type of aid.

4. Apply for Aid — Instructions on how to apply for aid, including using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, are provided. There is also an explanation of how aid is determined and links to more resources.

5. Repay Your Loans — If part of your financial aid package includes student loans, this section covers everything you need to know about managing them.

Help from Washington

StudentAid is a very comprehensive and useful website. The design of the site, with its subdued typography and color palette, allows you to easily find the information you're looking for. The copy is written in clear, easy-to-understand language that helps make a seemingly overwhelming task more approachable. The federal government has provided an excellent tool for families planning on pursuing higher education.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.



KEVIN O'NEILL

InSites