



# BORROWING GUIDE

How to Borrow Responsibly for College.

[risla.com](https://risla.com)

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# Types of Student Loans

If you need student loans to help you pay for college, you are not alone. But it is important that you conduct a thorough comparison of all of your options and make sure you understand the rates, annual percentage rate (APR), fees, and terms of any loan program you are considering. Below are available types of student and parent education loans to help you get started.

## Federal Direct Subsidized & Unsubsidized Loans

**Description:** Loans for students funded by the U.S. Department of Education. These loans come in two forms: subsidized and unsubsidized.

**Subsidized:** No payment is due while in school and no interest accrues while in school for this need based federal loan.

**Unsubsidized:** Like the subsidized loan, no payment is due while in school. Unlike the subsidized loan, interest does accrue while attending school and will be calculated into your monthly payment when repayment begins. Monitor your unsubsidized loan at [studentaid.gov](https://studentaid.gov) to stay on top of accrued interest. It is best to pay any interest that has accrued on the unsubsidized loan prior to graduation.

**Rates:** Rates are fixed and are set each year in May based on the 10-year Treasury bill plus a markup. For the 2025/26 academic year, the undergraduate loan interest rate is 6.39% and the rate for graduate students is 7.94%.

**Fees:** 1.057% fee through 9/30/2025. Fees are deducted from the amount disbursed to the school.

### Annual Limits:

Dependent Student Limits Subsidized/Unsubsidized		
Year in School	Total Direct Lending	
First	\$5,500	No more than \$3,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.
Second	\$6,500	No more than \$4,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.
Third-Fifth	\$7,500	No more than \$5,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.
Graduate Unsubsidized Limits		
Annual	\$20,500	
Aggregate	Depends Upon Degree	

**Eligibility:** U.S. citizen/permanent residents; full/half-time students.

**Subsidized:** For students with financial need, as determined by the FAFSA and school costs.

**Unsubsidized:** For students without financial need.

**Repayment Term:** Up to 10 years for standard repayment. Graduated, extended, and income-driven repayment options also available. Deferment, forbearance options, and other benefits apply.

**Grace Period:** 6 months

**How to Apply:** Complete the FAFSA by your school's deadline. Also, complete an additional application, known as a Master Promissory Note, and complete entrance counseling to accept your award.

**Learn More:** [studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans](https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans)

## Federal PLUS Loans

**Description:** Loans funded by the U.S. Dept. of Education and intended for graduate students and parents of undergraduate students.

**Rate:** Rates are fixed and are set each year in May based on the 10-year Treasury bill plus a markup. For the 2025/2026 academic year, PLUS interest rate is 8.94%

**Fees:** 4.228% fee (through 9/30/2025) deducted from amount disbursed to the school.

**Eligibility:** U.S. citizen/permanent resident; parent of dependent undergraduate or a graduate student. A credit check is required.

**Amount:** Up to the difference between college costs and total financial aid received.



## RISLA

- ◆ State-based education loans from a non-profit lender
- ◆ Borrowers can be a student with a cosigner or a parent
- ◆ Competitive, fixed interest rates
- ◆ Fast and easy application
- ◆ Zero fees
- ◆ No pre-payment penalties
- ◆ Learn more at [risla.com](http://risla.com).

**Repayment Term:** Up to 10 years for standard repayment. Loan repayment begins 60 days after final disbursement. Parents or graduate students can defer payments until 6 months after the student leaves school. Interest accrues during this period.

**Minimum payment:** \$50/month

**How to Apply:** Submit the FAFSA by your school's deadline. The PLUS Loan can be included in your financial aid award package. You can apply for it and you do not have to accept the award if it is part of your financial aid package. The Master Promissory Note is also required.

**Visit:** [studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans](http://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans)

## State-Based Education Loans

**Description:** Education loans originated by State-based agencies, often with State-based incentives. These lenders are typically non-profit agencies that offer competitively low interest rates.

**Rates:** Rates vary from program to program and are often very competitive. Programs offered usually include Undergraduate, Graduate, and Parent Loans.

**Eligibility:** A credit check & cosigner are usually required.

**Amount:** Loan limits vary by program.

**Repayment Term:** Repayment terms vary by program.

**How to Apply:** Each lender will have specific procedures for you to follow.

## Private Education Loans

**Description:** Private loans for students and/or parents are available from a lender or bank, with a variable or fixed interest rate. Variable rates change as market conditions change so they carry more risk. When your interest rate changes on a variable rate loan, your monthly payment also changes, so you need to have flexibility in your budget. With private lenders, the rate you receive is often based on your credit score. Fees and rates vary considerably based on the individual loan program and lender.

**Eligibility:** A credit check is usually required; cosigner is often required.

**Amount:** Loan limits vary by program.

**Repayment Term:** Terms vary by program.

**How to Apply:** Each lender has specific procedures to follow.



## Ask These 15 Questions Before Borrowing a Student or Parent Education Loan

As a rule, you should always take advantage of any available scholarships and grants and pay what you can from income and savings before turning to education loans.

If you do need college loans, Federal Direct Subsidized and Unsubsidized Loans are a good place to start. You must have financial need to be eligible for a subsidized loan. If you do, your school will include it in your aid package. If you do not have financial need, your school may award you an unsubsidized loan. These federal student loan programs have annual and aggregate borrowing limits.

If you still need to borrow after exhausting the above options, you may want to consider looking into a State-based education loan, Federal PLUS Loan, or private student loan. Remember to limit the amount you borrow!

### Before you borrow, always ask each lender:

1. What is the Annual Percentage Rate (APR)?
2. Is the interest rate fixed or variable? (Variable rates can change monthly or annually.)
3. Is the rate I receive based on my credit?
4. What are the fees? (Types of fees: repayment, origination, default, late payment fees.)
5. What is the loan term?
6. What would my monthly payment be if I borrowed \$X,XXX? Could my payment change?
7. When would my first payment be due?
8. How are loan funds disbursed? (To you or the school?)
9. What steps do I need to take to complete an application?
10. How long does it take to process an application?
11. Are there loan limits? Annual? Aggregate?
12. Who is eligible for this loan?
13. Do I need a cosigner?
14. What deferment and forbearance options are available to me?
15. If times get tough for me, are there income-based repayment options?

# Determining Borrowing Needs

With college costs on the rise and often exceeding \$50,000, college has become increasingly more difficult to afford. Often times, income, assets, and savings, including education savings plans, are not enough to cover your family's contribution. Financial aid can help reduce the cost of college but families are still often left with a considerable gap.

You should attempt to get as much free money as possible before turning to loans to cover college costs. You may receive grants and/or scholarships in your financial aid package from your school, but outside scholarships are also available to help families fund a higher education. Local scholarships are widely available and are often easier to obtain than national scholarships.

Visit [RIScholarships.org](https://rischolarships.org) to search through a comprehensive listing of hard-to-find local scholarships.

## TIPS FOR STUDENTS & PARENTS

### How to Compare Award Letters & Paying the Balance

Making sense of financial aid award letters can be a daunting task for families as they make college enrollment decisions. Currently, schools don't use a standardized form, so comparing financial aid offers from multiple colleges isn't always easy. Use this guide and our worksheet on page 7 to compare your awards and come up with a plan to pay your tuition bill:

- 1. Add up your direct costs.** Direct costs are costs paid directly to the school, such as tuition, fees (such as health insurance fees), school-offered meal plans, and/or room and board. Other costs related to your total cost of attendance, such as books, travel costs, computers, off-campus housing, and other miscellaneous costs, are considered indirect costs.
- 2. Calculate your total gift aid.** Gift aid is free to you and includes grants and scholarships. The first step to comparing award letters is to sum up your total gift aid. Subtract any gift aid from your total direct costs. Do not subtract work-study or loans from your total costs since these are considered self-help aid.
- 3. Consider what savings you have available to help meet tuition costs.** Do you have a 529 college savings plan or a Coverdell savings account? Any other savings or gifts meant for college? Subtract any resources you will use from your direct costs.
- 4. Determine if you have any income available to help pay college costs.** Most colleges offer a payment plan that allows you to spread out the cost of tuition over the course of a school year. Typically, a payment plan administrator charges



a one-time enrollment fee. Be aware that making late payments can result in high fees. Contact the college Bursar's office or Financial Aid Office to get information regarding payments plans.

5. **Add up federal student loans.** If the Federal Direct Subsidized or Unsubsidized Loan are included in your financial aid award, decide if you would like to accept these awards. Remember, you will have to pay interest on loans so you want to borrow as little as possible. However, if you are taking loans, this is the place to start. Make sure you understand the terms of these loans before accepting them. Subtract the amount you will accept from your direct costs.
6. **Think about how you will meet the difference**  
The remaining balance may be higher than expected. Most schools are not able to meet 100% of your financial aid eligibility. If you plan to borrow, whether it is a PLUS loan, State-based loan, or private education loan, remember to be a good consumer and explore rates, fees, and terms. Factor your borrowing into the whole picture when determining which aid package is best for your family. Include borrowing for direct costs and any indirect costs, such as books, fees and transportation that would not be covered by work-study earnings or other income and savings.
7. **Add up the total amount you will need to borrow at each school.** This includes federal student loans, PLUS loans, State-based loans, and private education loans (remember to be careful when comparing rates, terms, and fees for any of these options before signing the note!) Make adjustments if you still have a balance due or have indirect costs you will need to cover with loan funds.
8. **When comparing award letters, focus on total gift aid and the total amount you will need to borrow for school.** It is easy to get swept away by a big financial aid offer. But remember, it isn't always the total award amount that is most important. Pay attention to how much of your financial need each college met and how they met your need. The less you need to cover with loans, the better. Also, figure out if awards are renewable. Be wary of scholarships and grants that are only good for your first year.
9. **You do not need to accept the financial aid package as is.** Loans need to be paid back with interest, so try to limit the amount you borrow by reducing your award amounts or declining loans if you don't need them. If you think you need more aid, you can always try to appeal the offer. Make sure you have documentation to support your request.
10. **Complete award acceptance forms by the deadline.** If you do not, the aid awarded to you may go to another student.

## XYZ College University

### Student Financial Aid Award Notification

Dear Student,

CONGRATULATIONS on your acceptance to XYZ College University! On behalf of the university we are pleased to offer you the following financial assistance towards your pursuit of higher education.

#### Student Financial Aid Offer

Award Acceptance	Fall	Spring	Total
Federal Pell Grant yes no	\$1875	\$1875	\$3750
College Work Study yes no	\$750	\$750	\$1500
Institution Grant yes no	\$500	\$500	\$1000
Direct Subsidized Loan yes no	\$1750	\$1750	\$3500

This award is the result of a review of your financial aid application. Next to each type of award you have the opportunity to accept or decline all, none or some of the financial assistance offered to you. Please indicate your choices by circling the appropriate response. Then sign and date the letter below and return to the financial aid office within fifteen days. Two copies of the letter are enclosed; please keep the second copy for your records. If you have any comments, questions, concerns or any unusual circumstances, please contact our office as soon as possible. We look forward to seeing you in the fall.

Director  
Financial Aid  
XYZ College/University  
(101) 555-1234

# Meeting College Costs Worksheet

	College 1	College 2	College 3	College 4
College name				
<b>Direct Costs</b>				
Tuition				
Room & board				
Health insurance fees				
Fees				
Total Direct Costs (A)				
<b>Gift Aid</b>				
Federal Pell grant				
Federal SEOG grant				
Federal TEACH grant				
State grant				
College grant				
College scholarship				
Outside scholarships & grants				
Total Gift Aid (B)				
<b>Personal Resources</b>				
529 Plan				
Coverdell savings account				
Other college savings account				
Parent savings & assets				
Student savings & assets				
Other				
Total Resources (C)				
<b>Self-help Aid</b>				
Tuition payment plan				
Direct Subsidized Loan				
Direct Unsubsidized Loan				
Federal PLUS Loan				
State-based student loan				
Private education loan				
Home equity loan				
Total Self-help Aid (D)				
<b>Summary</b>				
Total Direct Costs (A)				
Total Gift Aid (B)				
Amount Due to School (A - B)				
Total Personal Resources (C)				
Total Self-help Aid (D)				
Gap (A-B-C-D)				

Don't forget to come up with a plan for paying indirect costs, like books, transportation, and living expenses. Visit us online at [risla.com](http://risla.com) and use our College Calculator under Tools & Resources.

# Smart Borrowing

The average student graduates with over \$30,000 in student loan debt. Many students and parents are surprised to learn that they owe hundreds of dollars per month in student loan payments after graduation. That's why before you borrow, you should understand your options and learn how to borrow responsibly.

## Minimize Finance Charges

Your goal should be to borrow at the lowest cost possible, while still allowing for manageable monthly payments. This means looking for the lowest interest rates and fees and balancing those with benefits of the loan and the length of the repayment term. Being a good consumer and comparing your options takes work, but the payoff can make the effort well worth the time spent.

During your research, keep in mind shorter repayment terms typically mean you will pay less interest than if you had chosen a longer repayment (assuming the rates are equivalent). As an added bonus, shorter repayment terms in the private loan market often have lower interest rates, compounding your savings. Keep in mind that although your monthly payments may be higher with a shorter term, you'll save more money in the long run and pay-off years earlier, freeing up cash for other things!

Does interest rate really matter? You may think it is immaterial, but look at how much a 1% difference in interest rate can really make!

Interest rate	Number of payments	Est. Monthly Payment	Total Interest Charges	Total Cost of Loan
Assuming a \$10,000 loan with zero fees and a 10-year term				
4.0%	120	\$101	\$2,149	\$12,149
5.0%	120	\$106	\$2,728	\$12,728
6.0%	120	\$111	\$3,322	\$13,322
7.0%	120	\$116	\$3,933	\$13,933
8.0%	120	\$121	\$4,559	\$14,559
9.0%	120	\$127	\$5,201	\$15,201
10.0%	120	\$132	\$5,858	\$15,858
11.0%	120	\$138	\$6,530	\$16,530
12.0%	120	\$143	\$7,217	\$17,217
Assuming a \$10,000 loan with zero fees and a 15-year term				
4.0%	180	\$74	\$3,314	\$13,314
5.0%	180	\$79	\$4,234	\$14,234
6.0%	180	\$84	\$5,189	\$15,189
7.0%	180	\$90	\$6,179	\$16,179
8.0%	180	\$96	\$7,202	\$17,202
9.0%	180	\$101	\$8,257	\$18,257
10.0%	180	\$108	\$9,343	\$19,343
11.0%	180	\$114	\$10,459	\$20,459
12.0%	180	\$120	\$11,603	\$21,603

## What amount is the “right” amount to borrow for college?

Many students are eager to sign whatever it takes to go to their dream school. Unfortunately, they often don't understand how much it will cost them after they graduate. Think about your return on investment and what will be affordable after graduation.

You don't need to borrow the full amount listed on your financial aid award letter. It is tempting to borrow a little extra for something you want but don't actually need.

## How much will you earn?

Do your research on entry level salaries in your field of choice. Will you be able to afford your monthly payments with the salary you will make? Remember to account for all four years of your education when estimating your total borrowing needs. Too many students have a “borrow now, deal later” attitude that ends up getting them into trouble. A good rule of thumb is to borrow (for all years of education combined) no more than your expected starting salary after graduation. Use a salary calculator to get an estimate ([risla.com/salary-calculator](http://risla.com/salary-calculator)).

# Cosigning for a Student Loan

## Why be a cosigner?

There are two major factors to consider here. First, acting as a cosigner allows you to take an active role in funding the education of a loved one. It's a noble cause and the long-term value comes from seeing a person successfully morph from a high school graduate to a working, college-educated professional.

The second factor is more practical, but no less important. Most high school grads and college students simply don't have an established credit history. They haven't had time to build a successful repayment history with various lenders like credit card companies or mortgage lenders. As a result, they're unable to borrow alone. Most lenders will require that a second person – a person with an established credit history – to cosign on the loan.

## What are the benefits?

For most borrowers, the single biggest benefit to getting a cosigner is that it increases the borrower's chances of being approved for a student loan. With most modern students unable to pay for higher education without borrowing, cosigners open up possibilities to students who would otherwise be unable to attend college (or at least the college of their choice). The second benefit is that putting a cosigner on the loan may lead to a better interest rate if rates are based on credit score and the cosigner's score is higher than the primary borrower's score.

In addition, a cosigner provides a substantial barrier to late payments or default.

## What are a cosigner's responsibilities?

Cosigning will require a credit check. It may require submitting other documents, such as proof of income and/or savings, but the most important responsibilities come much later, during repayment. Just as a borrower is responsible for on-time monthly payments until the loan is satisfied, a cosigner shares that same responsibility.

Student loan debt is a long-term commitment, with repayment periods that can extend for many years. Throughout the course of that repayment, the cosigner will be responsible for repayment just as the borrower is. That means that if the borrower fails to meet the terms of repayment and the cosigner doesn't do their part to chip in, both parties will be penalized.

Some loans will allow the servicer to release the cosigner after certain conditions have been met. Make sure to ask your servicer about this option, if it is available, and be very careful to follow the guidelines.

Student loans cannot be discharged through bankruptcy, unless it can be proven that the student loan creates an "undue hardship". It's important to ask your lender about other contingencies as well, so that you can be clear on the terms of your loan. What happens if the borrower becomes ill or is unable to work? Will the loan be discharged if the borrower dies? How long will it take to alert the cosigner that there is a problem if the borrower misses a payment or is in danger of default?

Knowing your responsibilities as a cosigner is an important first step towards helping your loved one cover the cost of school. Armed with the right info, you can feel confident that you're helping to make a difference and that you're making the commitment with a clear understanding of what it entails!

# Getting Denied for a Loan

If you are denied on your student loan, know that all is not lost. There is no credit criteria on Federal Direct Subsidized and Unsubsidized loans, so make sure you have exhausted the annual limits on those first.

If you are denied on a Federal PLUS Loan, your student may be able to get additional Federal Direct student loan funds. You may also have the option of adding an “endorser” on your loan to help you qualify.

If you are denied on a private or State-based student loan, call the lender and ask why. It may be something as simple as an address mismatch or

you entered the wrong social security number or had a typo for your stated income.

A quick phone call may solve your problem. However, if the issue is your credit score, financial history, or some other factor, there may be some steps you can take. Below, we have included some common reasons for student loan denial and how to handle them.

If you were denied and you have taken the steps above, remember there may be nothing you can do to change the lender’s decision. You’ll likely have to find another way of paying for college.

## Your Credit and Credit Score

The credit score is a model developed to help lenders assess your ability to pay back a loan. If you are regularly late on payments, have any collection accounts, have filed bankruptcy, or you have a judgment or lien against you, your credit score is likely to have taken a hit. However, even just having too much debt can affect your score. If you strongly believe your credit score should be higher than it is, check out your credit reports to make sure there aren’t any errors or accounts you know you didn’t open.

If your credit score is just a hair away from meeting the lender’s criteria, some simple changes could affect your approval. For example, part of your credit score is determined based on the number of open accounts you currently have. By ensuring that previously closed accounts are no longer included, check the accuracy of your credit report. Removing previously closed accounts might be all you need to do to give your credit score a little boost.

## Your Income

Most lenders want to see that you are earning enough to pay back the debt you are taking on. Before applying for a loan, you may want to ask the lender if they have a threshold for income in order to qualify for the loan. If they are willing to share this information, it could save you from applying for a loan you won’t be eligible for. Keep in mind, the lender may look at the student income, the cosigner income, or both. Adding a cosigner to the loan typically helps students qualify for loans they otherwise would be denied for and can also help students secure a better rate. Typically, a lender is going to want documentation to back up the income you made, so be prepared to send it in, if asked.

## Debt-To-Income (DTI)

Your lender may take a look at your debt-to-income ratio or free cash flow to determine your eligibility. Even if the lender doesn’t have a minimum income requirement, your income can be very important in helping you qualify for a loan based on how much debt you have.

Your debt-to-income ratio takes into account how much you have to pay each month towards your debt (mortgages, loans, credit cards, etc.) vs. how much money you are taking in each month. A higher debt-to-income ratio is less desirable because it could indicate you may have trouble making your monthly payments should something go wrong. What’s a high debt-to-income threshold? Lenders all differ, but if your DTI ratio is in the 40% range, you may be at risk for denial.

If you are at the end of an installment loan, such as a car loan, and you want to reduce your debt-to-income ratio, pay it off a month or two before you apply for your student loans which could significantly reduce your debt-to-income calculation.

## Your Assets

The lender may request documentation to prove you have savings or assets to help you repay the loan should you lose your job or find yourself unable to work for some other reason. If you don’t have any savings or your income is too low, you are less likely to be able to repay your debt. Create an account with a few months worth of transferable savings to prove you have the funds you need to pay if things don’t go as planned.

# Student Loan FAQ

## What are Entrance and Exit Interviews?

If a student has federal student loans, he or she will be required by law to complete an entrance interview prior to receiving a loan and an exit interview before graduation. Entrance interviews help students understand their federal student loan responsibilities. Exit interviews are used to inform students about repayment obligations and options.

## What is a grace period?

After graduation, students may be entitled to a grace period, or a period during which they aren't required to make student loan payments, typically for six months. Although a grace period applies to all federal loans, not all non-federal loans afford this option so make sure to check with the lender to determine when payments will be due on each of your family member's loans.

Making payments towards student loans during the grace period (and also during any deferment periods) can be a good idea. It can reduce the amount of interest that is added to your balance and ultimately paid over the life of the loan.

## What is deferment and forbearance?

Although the terms are often used interchangeably, as both terms represent the same outcome, deferment and forbearance are slightly different. Deferment refers to the period of time when minimum loan payments are not required to be made for deferred loans. The deferred loan's APR includes this period of non-payment in the calculation of the cost of the loan. Forbearance refers to a period of time when a borrower requests a permissible, temporary

pause from making the minimum payment. Most student loan lenders permit some amount of forbearance time with the understanding that financial struggles can exist after graduation. Forbearance time is not included in the APR calculation as it is an unanticipated pause in payment. Although both deferment and forbearance allow payments of any amount to be made during that time to reduce the amount of interest that is still accruing, any interest that is unpaid during that time is capitalized (added to principal) when the deferment or forbearance period ends.

## What happens if I default on my student loan?

Defaulting on your student loan has many serious consequences. If you are having trouble making payments, remember to call your student loan servicer to learn about any alternative loan repayment options available to you, such as forbearance or Income-Based Repayment. If you default on an education loan, you may:

- Be ineligible for federal and private student aid in the future.
- Lose your forbearance options.
- Be required to pay entire loan balance immediately.
- Incur additional costs if account goes to collection.
- Damage your credit and ability to borrow in the future, rent an apartment, or even get a job.
- Have your federal or State tax return withheld or be applied to your defaulted loan balance.
- Have your wages garnished in order to pay your student loan bill.
- Need to appear in court if sued and have a judgement rendered against you.





# Preparing, Planning, and Paying

## For Your Education Journey

### CONTACT INFORMATION

#### PHONE

800-758-7562

#### EMAIL

[customerservice@risla.com](mailto:customerservice@risla.com)

#### ADDRESS

RISLA | Rhode Island Student Loan Authority

935 Jefferson Blvd, Suite 3000 | Warwick, RI 02886

[risla.com](http://risla.com)



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935 Jefferson Blvd., Suite 3000  
Warwick, RI 02886-2225  
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[risla.com](http://risla.com)