

Dealing with the Financial Aid Office

Should You Appeal Your Aid Award?

If you're interested in attending a college and the amount or type of aid you've been offered is making your choice difficult (or impossible), contact the aid office.

By Phone vs. Face-to-Face

For routine matters, like getting the answer to a straightforward question, a phone call is the easiest way to get in touch. Communication by email and letters comes next, but you'll probably have to wait a little longer for an answer. Look over the award letter and all the material that comes with it before you contact the aid office. Make sure the answer to your question hasn't already been provided.

If you have a serious problem, a visit is by far the best way to deal with the aid office. Make sure to call and make an appointment. After admission decisions go out, the aid office is, understandably, quite busy.

Provide Clear Supporting Information

Financial aid staff refer to a request to increase an award as an appeal. You should be ready to support your request with accurate and complete financial information. If you feel that a college has underestimated your family's financial need or if your family's financial circumstances have changed since you completed the aid application, the aid counselor will want to see income statements or expense records. If you would like to be considered for additional aid because another college is offering more money, bring a copy of the other college's letter.

Negotiating

What is negotiating? First of all, it's a term that financial aid administrators do not use. To them, negotiating is what a customer does to get the best deal on a used car. To an aid counselor, there's a clear distinction between the price they've set for you in your letter and the price written on the windshield of a car.

Financial Aid Award Appeals

Financial aid staff refer to a request to increase an award as an appeal. If you have a good reason, they don't mind if you ask them to take another look. It usually means you have enough interest to want to reach a bottom line that your family can afford. What are good reasons to appeal your aid award?

Financial

The most common reason is that your family can't afford the family share. In this case, you should be prepared to present information about your family's financial circumstances. You may want the aid office to take another look at your application or want to present new information. The success of your appeal will depend on whether the aid office decides to increase your need and has the money to add to your award.

Competitive

Support your request with accurate and complete financial information. You might also appeal because your first choice college has given you less aid than other colleges. Since each college is unique in the way it operates its aid program, this can happen quite often. You should show your first choice college a copy of the other college's award letter and ask if they can improve your package.

Your success depends on the college's policy towards competitive appeals. The majority of colleges will have carefully crafted your award (and already spent their aid money) and so won't respond to a competitive appeal. Some, however, don't want to lose an admitted student for a financial reason and will consider an aid increase. A college's response to your request might vary according to your admission rating.

Does It Pay to Appeal?

Yes, because you may receive more money and there is almost no chance you will receive less. However, it takes time to prepare an appeal and time for the college to act on it. You shouldn't appeal because it was recommended in a magazine article or your neighbor did it successfully. If you can articulate and support your request for more aid, give it a try.

Even if your appeal does not work out, keep in touch with the aid office. It's the job of the staff in the aid office to help families work out ways to afford the cost of the college. For example, if you decide to borrow more money than the loan in the award letter, talk with the financial aid office first. They may be able to steer you to a loan with more favorable terms.