You Got Into College, But You Didn't Get Enough Financial Aid — Now What?

by ALLISON SLATER TATE

Getting into your dream college feels great — until you see the nightmare of a price tag that goes along with it.

What should you do if you are the recipient of a golden ticket to your first-choice college, but didn't get enough financial aid from that school? Or got more aid from other schools that aren't your top choice?

In many cases, you can appeal. But there are some things you should be aware of first.

First, know there is a difference between merit aid and need-based aid, and each college will manage the financial aid process and any appeals differently, Alison Rabil, Director and Assistant Vice Provost of Duke University's office of undergraduate financial support, told NBC News.

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If the discrepancies in financial aid between a first-choice college and others are merit - and not need - based, it can be worth a shot to let the first-choice school know, Rabil said.

"It's always a good idea to send along the competing offer letter with a nice note about why you would rather attend the other institution and see what they say," she said. "You can't lose anything by asking."

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* But the appeals situation changes if the aid offered is directly related to actual financial need.

"At a school like Duke, where the aid is primarily need-based, the only time we will reconsider an aid offer is if the family's financial circumstances were not fully taken into consideration the first time," Rabil said. "So writing a letter to the financial aid office about what competing financial pressures are weighing on your family that would make the calculated contribution difficult is helpful for the office to understand."

Changes to a family's financial circumstances could cover a wide range of scenarios, Rabil said. "Do you have relatives who are not in your household you are supporting? Are you recovering from a job loss from a few years ago that cannot be seen from your current tax returns? Are there expenses your family faces that are not apparent in the information you have submitted: medical bills, other educational expenses, etc.? It is no guarantee that the institution will make a change to the award, but again, it does not do any harm to try."

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Union College vice president for admissions, financial aid, and enrollment Matt Malatesta echoed Rabil's thoughts.

"Not all schools can or do meet 'full need,' and even those that do might have different student loan expectations and/or needs methodology to assess the situation in the first place," he told NBC News. "The most successful appeals in our process result when we learn something that we didn't know from the financial aid forms."

Both Rabil and Malatesta stressed that families' attitudes are crucial during this process.

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"The more you can explain around your financial situation in a respectful and cooperative way, the better off you will be," said Duke's Rabil. "Developing a relationship with the office where your son or daughter will be attending will help you tremendously. We do realize that it is stressful for parents to feel as though they cannot afford their son or daughter's dream school — so have a conversation about that with the financial aid counselor: 'I can't write a check for that amount, what are the resources available to me to manage it?' she said.

"Most families panic when they see the family contribution, but when they realize that they can use combinations of funds such as payment plans, savings, and loans for the parent and other loans for the student, then they can make a reasonable decision about whether they are willing to sacrifice that in order to make it happen," she added.

If it does all come down to money, don't give up on a college without letting them know that financial aid is what's keeping you from enrolling there, says college admissions counselor Sara Harberson of [Admissions Revolution](http://admissionsrevolution.com/).

"While admissions professionals often live in the world of subjectivity, as admissions decisions are rarely cut and dry, financial aid professionals are more clinical about their roles," she told NBC News. "That's why it's important to let both your admissions officer and your financial aid officer know if you have concerns with your award. The two offices need to communicate openly especially if they could lose a student because of financial aid reasons."