

Going to college?

Make an effort to save money by approaching higher education like any other major purchase.

When buying items like cars and homes, consumers shop and bargain to get the best price. After all, these items are major purchases.

College also is one of the greatest expenses a family will ever face. Yet, when it comes to this major purchase, students and parents seem to view shopping and bargaining as taboo.

They may select a college because it's close to home or because one or two of the student's friends are going there. Then, they take on thousands of dollars in debt to pay for room, board, and tuition.

A different view of tuition

According to Paul Celuch, with College Assistance Plus, college debt has come to be viewed as acceptable by students and parents alike.

As a result, the average college graduate leaves school with \$27,000 in college loan debt and \$3,800 total debt on multiple credit cards.

Celuch worked 30 years in sales and marketing with companies like MCI and IBM before he and a friend, Phil James, launched College Assistance Plus in Honeoye Falls, New York.

After putting two children through college, Celuch later realized he'd spent more than he should have—\$50,000 more, which could have been used to benefit God's Kingdom.

Through teaching Crown classes and Treasure Principle classes in his church, and through his work with College Assistance Plus, he's also gotten an up-close look at how debt in general, and college debt in particular, affects families.

In addition, a pastor confided to Celuch that college loan debt is one of the biggest problems he uncovers in premarital counseling.

One of the saddest aspects of paying too much for college is that

49 percent of students never graduate, and 90 percent don't end up working in their degree field, Celuch says. "It's bad enough to graduate with debt," he adds. "But it's even worse to not graduate and still have debt."

Needs, options, and price

To minimize costs, Celuch urges families to treat college like other major consumer purchases. First of all, when shopping for a car or house, consumers try to find choices that best fit their needs. Thus, a family of six would rule out a \$100,000 sports car with two seats and opt for a minivan.

Likewise, college consumers may benefit substantially by looking for the school that best fits their needs, both educational and financial. For example, a college that a student has yet to consider may be willing to offer thousands more in aid per year if that student is seeking a particular major.

Second, in order to get the best deal, car and house buyers look at multiple options in different places. In the same way, college shoppers may benefit by looking at a number of schools in different locations, not just what happens to be in the neighborhood.

As a result, a student from Ohio may end up saving more by going to a college in Illinois if that college is seeking to attract students from Ohio. Celuch is operating by this principle and uses a database of some 2,500 colleges to find schools that are best suited for students' desires, majors, and financial needs.

Third, consumers look for the best price. This requires time spent in shopping.

It also requires some negotiating, and once students have narrowed their college choices to about three institutions, Celuch has had success in getting those schools to compete for a particular student. He notes that colleges

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have their own sources of financial aid, and these sources are usually more substantial than scholarships, which average only \$250 each.

Approaching college like any other consumer item has proved to be a workable strategy, as evidenced by the tremendous growth of College Assistance Plus, which now has franchises in several northeastern states as well as Nevada, Missouri, and North Carolina.

You can't afford to be passive

Celuch encourages parents and students to get a head start on searching for the right college. He says the biggest savings are usually reaped when parents and students begin their college searches early during the high school years.

It's also helpful for students to earn good grades and take the

ACT or SAT multiple times in order to increase their scores.

Parents and students can't afford to be passive about their searches for colleges, which raised their prices an average of 7 percent per year during the past five years, Celuch says. Thus, students' costs will be 28 percent higher in their senior years than they were in their freshman years.

Between 1976 and 2005, college costs in the U.S. soared 284 percent. However, using inflation-adjusted dollars, the annual income of college graduates today is \$1,000 less than it was in 1976. That's why it's even more important for students and parents to get the very best deal for their money.

Editor's note: More information on this topic is available by visiting collegeassistanceplus.com.