

The Price of Admission.

Forget about tuition. Just getting into college can cost plenty.

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By Jean Sherman Chatzky Additional reporting by Amy Wilson

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(MONEY Magazine) – Last fall my nephew Matt applied to college. When he wasn't working on his list of schools, he was visiting them. When he wasn't visiting, he was honing his personal statement. It took patience on the part of his parents--and pretty deep pockets. Matt's application process included three months of SAT tutoring, one set of SATs, seven SAT IIs, eight applications, six road trips and a private college counselor. Conservative total: \$6,000. There's no doubt that getting into the school of your choice has become more competitive. But does it have to be more expensive as well?

I'm not for skimping on this important decision. One-fifth of college students who enrolled in a four-year school in 1995 had transferred by 1998. Another 13% had left and not returned. With a \$40,000 price tag on a single year of college, that's a pretty expensive mistake. And repeating the process is costly. But experts say you can cut costs without hurting your chances of picking--and getting into--the right school. Here's how.

Narrow your list. It's not unusual for kids to apply to 15 or 20 schools. That's \$800 to \$1,000 in application fees alone. Princeton Review founder John Katzman says five or six schools is more reasonable. Dan Walls, dean of admissions for Emory University, says colleges will waive the application fee if a high school guidance counselor writes a letter expressing financial concern--"but if they say they're applying to 20 schools, we won't."

Curb travel. An on-campus interview is no longer a must, particularly if you live far away. So take one trip with your kids to answer the macro questions: big school or small, urban or rural. Then let your child travel with friends and bunk in the dorms.

Start early. Applying early to a first-choice school--and finding out if you're in by mid-December, before the final round of applications is due--can mean huge savings. Granted, only the most competitive schools offer this option, but if your top choice does, price isn't the only advantage: This year the students Harvard admitted early will fill 60% of its 2007 class. Plus, some application fees go up late in the season.

Think carefully about private counselors. Public school guidance counselors serve some 625 students each. That's driving a boom in private counseling. In 2002, 6% of high schoolers hired help, up from 1% in 1990--despite the cost, which runs from \$700 in Alabama to \$3,200 in New York for a sophomore-to-senior-year package. Katzman argues that only well-connected former admissions directors are worth the freight. Not surprisingly, Mark Sklarow, director of the Independent Educational Consultants

Association, disagrees. He says the job of a private counselor is to fine-tune your list, choose schools to visit, decide whether to repeat the SATs--and thus to contain costs. My advice: If you go this route, be sure the person is really qualified. An IECA member must have a master's degree and three years' experience, and have visited 100 campuses and passed a reference check. Having gotten his or her own kid into a good school is not enough for the IECA--or for you.

Editor-at-large Jean Chatzky appears regularly on NBC's Today. You can contact her by e-mail at moneytalk@money.com.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AMY WILSON