

College's hidden costs: What the admissions office doesn't tell you

By **Bruce Horovitz** November 26, 2016

Whatever you think you know about college costs, you're wrong. It's going to cost more. Lots more.

For many families, college's hidden costs will probably be a prime topic of discussion this Thanksgiving weekend, when students filter home — many for the first time since school started — for urgently needed refills on home-cooked grub, family face time and cold cash.

Take it from me — the father of a college freshman. We thought we knew what our daughter's first year at school would cost, but we were dead wrong. You, however, don't have to be. Think of this as a guide to figuring out what college will actually cost you and your kid. This story isn't about the basics such as tuition, room and board. Most — but not all — colleges spell that out on their websites.

This is about everything else. The costs that you usually cannot pilfer from the 529 College Saving Plan account. Like the Uber rides to those off-campus parties. The off-campus food runs. Even orientation — with, of course, a stop at the college bookstore for sweatshirts.

On a monthly basis, these costs typically stack up to \$250 to \$500 a month, estimates Mark Kantrowitz, publisher of Cappex.com, a website focused on how to pay for college. These costs may be close to what students pay for tuition.

“If you don't budget for this, you are bound to get a call around the middle of the first semester for more money,” Kantrowitz said. “Perhaps the goal of college should not just be about getting a good education but learning how not to run out of money.”

The real costs of college are not for the meek of heart or weak of wallet. What most colleges post on their websites as the estimated “cost of attendance” is typically focused on tuition, room and board and books. At James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., for example, that's listed at \$20,952 for an in-state undergraduate for the 2016-2017 school year. That adds up to just under \$84,000 over four years. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. But if you factor in the top end of the “hidden” costs — as estimated by Kantrowitz — that four-year price tag suddenly balloons to nearly \$108,000.

“The parents are probably the most surprised,” said David Levy, editor of Edvisors, a website that assists families in planning and paying for college. “Students often have no idea how expensive it is because Mom and Dad are paying for it.”

Not that Mom and Dad planned it this way. Nearly half of all parents of college students expect their children to pay for all or some of their costs, according to a recent Discover Student Loans survey of parents. That compares with 39 percent in 2012. Then reality sets in. Many students who plan to work get to school and find their class loads too heavy or available jobs too few.

We’re learning ourselves, on the fly.

Our daughter, Rachel, is a freshman at California State Polytechnic University at Pomona, one of those not-too-insanely-expensive California State colleges. Never mind that Rachel previously toured and applied to a handful of Virginia colleges including Virginia Commonwealth University and James Madison University. We even sent a down payment to JMU shortly after Rachel was accepted there. Things change. During a gap year that Rachel mostly spent volunteering abroad, she had a change of heart. We went through a second round of out-of-state college applications, and with Rachel’s heart set on a Los Angeles lifestyle and a Left Coast learning style, Cal Poly won her over.

Before writing that first check to Cal Poly, during a family campus visit, I sat down with the school’s associate director of financial aid, who figured, to the penny, that our daughter’s freshman year would cost \$33,221. Wrong. Well, maybe if Rachel never flew home for vacation. And we never went to visit her. And if she never ate a bite off campus. And, well, don’t just take it from me. Take it from the experts. Here, in no particular order, are costs to consider:

- **Transportation.** Few college costs are more unpredictable — and unnerving — than transportation, Levy said. The typical student attending an out-of-state school requires at least two, and usually three, round-trip tickets home during the school year, he said. Never mind that these flights are often pegged around holidays when fares are at their peaks. Many students attending in-state schools want their own cars — whose annual costs are typically magnified by exorbitant campus parking fees and added costs for on-campus traffic violations. For those without cars, frequent Uber charges can quickly break the bank. Most student Uber accounts are set up to parent credit cards, noted Jodi Okun, founder of College Financial Aid Advisors. “For safety reasons, most parents are willing to pay these costs,” she said.

- **Mandatory fees.** Most colleges require students to pay a laundry list of mandatory fees each semester, which are seriously consequential when added together. At American University, for example, undergraduates each semester pay a \$120 student technology fee, a \$65 sports center fee, an \$88.50 undergraduate activity fee and a \$130 Metro University Pass fee. That comes to \$403.50 per semester; or \$807 annually. “Sometimes it feels like the college is nickeling and diming you,” Kantrowitz said.

- **Off-campus eats.** Forget the hundreds — if not thousands — of dollars you pay for the campus meal plan each semester. Your kid is going to spend at least \$765 eating off campus annually, according to a study by Farmers Financial Solutions. Since that study, crunched in 2011, the “Starbucks factor” has increased that figure, though it’s unclear by how much, said John Mueting, president of Farmers Financial Solutions, the financial services arm of Farmers Insurance. By Kantrowitz’s estimates, if your kid opts to eat a \$10 meal off campus every Friday night, over four years, that could cost upward of \$2,000.

• **Computer.** Few costs bear the instant bite of buying that new college laptop. If your kid wants a new Apple MacBook Air with the works and a warranty, it can cost close to \$2,000, Kantrowitz said. Levy strongly recommends checking first with the college bookstore, which typically offers fat educational discounts via major manufacturers. Best bet: Buy last year's model, which typically will be on sale, or even a used one, he said. (Computer costs, by the way, can come out of 529 savings.)

• **Expensive majors.** Some majors cost more than others. Art majors will likely need to pay hundreds of additional dollars for materials each semester, Kantrowitz said. Majors in chemistry and physics will likely have costly lab fees. And some performing arts majors will have to pay extra for studio or practice room time.

• **Greek life.** Should your kid opt to join a fraternity or sorority, it's gonna cost you. A spokesman for the National Panhellenic Conference declined to give an average cost of dues, saying that they vary greatly from campus to campus. But dues alone can stretch to \$1,200 per semester, said Jane Horowitz, a career launch coach for college students. Some schools even require students to live in sorority or fraternity houses to join. But the real financial pinch of Greek life is often the cost of clothes, she said. One of her client's daughters had to buy seven dresses (at about \$150 each) after she was recruited to chair her sorority at a large, Southern university. The dresses alone cost more than \$1,000.

• **Internship.** "This is one of the biggest hidden costs of college," Horowitz said. A typical summer internship — most of which are nonpaying gigs — can cost upward of \$5,000 in transportation, housing, food and other related costs. One of her clients recently spent more than \$10,000 on their kid's 13-week summer internship at Sony in Los Angeles. "How do you put a price on this kind of experience, which your kid would never get in the classroom?" she asked.

Economy & Business Alerts

[Sign up](#)

Breaking news about economic and business issues.

• **Spring break.** This one's a killer. A spring break vacation for a college student can easily cost in the \$2,000 range for a full week, Okun said. Students from the East Coast often head west, and students from the West Coast often head east or south to Mexico. Airfares jump at spring break time, as do hotel costs. "I talk to parents about making certain their students pay their fair share of the spring break costs," Okun said.

• **Study abroad.** If your child plans to study abroad for even one semester, figure an additional \$10,000 in costs — excluding tuition, Horowitz said. Those costs include airfare, housing, food and any additional travel the student has in mind. "You don't think of this as a cost of college, but for many people, it really is," she said.

• **Silly stuff.** Don't fall for the marketing hype that's certain to fill your inbox right after your kid enrolls at college. Within days of Rachel's registration at Cal Poly, we started receiving regular emails from Our Campus Market, a school-approved marketer that, for \$120, would send her bimonthly care packages loaded with Doritos, Cheez-Its and Snickers bars. The pitch almost makes it sound like by ignoring it, your kid will be the only student who doesn't get TLC from Mom and Dad. Levy strongly discourages these kinds of purchases. "What your kid probably wants most is a thoughtful letter from home with a picture of the family pet," he said.

In the end, Kantrowitz said, it's too easy to blame the colleges and everyone else instead of looking inward. Yes, many colleges understate the real costs of attendance. But parents and students have to do their homework, too. For that matter, these additional college costs should not all be looked at with dread or horror.

“You can avoid some of them, but you don't really want to avoid all of them,” Kantrowitz said. “If you do, your kid will miss out on the full college experience.”

The Post Recommends

Student debt now affects a staggering number of elderly Americans

Consumers over 60 now hold \$67 billion in student loan debt, according to a new report by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

An Oregon lawmaker wants to ban you from driving with Fido in your lap

State Sen. Bill Hansell says driving with a dog in your lap can be just as distracting as yapping on your smartphone.

TV highlights: ‘The New Edition Story’ on BET

Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2016 | “Cristela Alonzo: Lower Classy” premieres on Netflix.

PAID PROMOTED STORIES

Recommended by



How I Finally Understood My 401(k) in 10 minutes

Mint.com



The Results Are In, The Top Sedans For 2017

VoteltUp



Funniest Sightings That Are Just Around The Corner

dailyleaks



How Older Men Tighten Their Skin

The Modern Man Today

Customer retention can boost profits up to 85%. Engaged agents can make it happen.

GET E-BOOK

10 Steps to Empowering Customer Service Agents

10 Innovate Ways to Make Your Customer Service Team Feel Empowered

Salesforce



If You're a Homeowner, Congress Urges You Claim Their \$4,250 Rebate by Jan 31st

TheDollarDaily

