



# College Planning Tool Kit for Adult Students





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## Why Should You Go Back to School?

**Do any of these statements sound familiar?**

*I've looked everywhere and can't find a job.*

*I lost my job and need retraining to get a new job.*

*I am stuck in a dead-end job.*

*I want to earn more money.*

**If you've made any of these statements, then college may be for you!**

Many adults return to school because they want to advance their career or change careers. Others may have experienced a life-changing event, such as job layoff or relocation. Whatever your reasons, there are definite benefits to obtaining a college degree.

Take a walk around a typical college campus and you'll see **students of all ages headed off to class!** A nontraditional student is also known as an adult learner and is characterized as a student who:

- has previously attended college and is returning to school;
- is a first-time college student who previously graduated from high school and went straight into the workforce;
- is completing a HiSET or high school diploma credential through Maine Adult Education and wants to go on to college.

**Going back to college and earning a degree is one of the best investments you will ever make.**

### *Did you know?*

- The median monthly income for bachelor's degree holders is 62% higher than for those with only a high school diploma.
- College graduates experience significantly lower unemployment and poverty rates.
- College graduates report overall better health.
- Children of college graduates are more likely to attend college.
- College graduates report an increased sense of self-esteem and personal satisfaction.

Baum, S., & Ma, J. (2007). Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society. Trends in Higher Education Series. College Board.

## Researching Careers

Before deciding where to attend, it is important to explore your career options. Here are some steps to finding the right career for you:



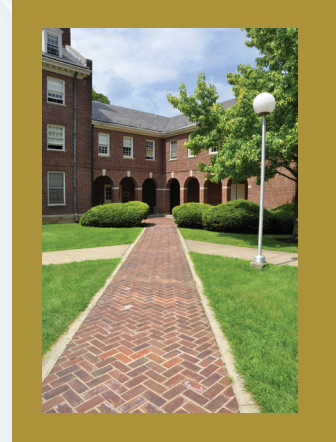
### Evaluate Your Interests and Determine Your Goals

Identifying your interests and goals will help you decide which fields of study and careers are right for you.



### Use FAME's Career Search

To help you get started, check out FAME's online career search. FAME's career search page links to the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Network Online (O\*NET). O\*NET is a comprehensive site that provides useful information on careers, including training requirements, expected salary and growth projections, as well as self-directed assessment profile tests.



### Schedule an Interview or Talk to Someone in the Field

Once you have a few career choices in mind, consider scheduling a meeting with someone who is working in that career or a related field. Be sure to focus your questions on the areas that are the most important to you.



### Consider Job Shadowing

Another way to get a better sense of a career is to job shadow. When you job shadow, you'll spend a day (or more) with someone while they do their work. Job shadowing provides an inside look at the job.



### Visit a Career Center

Maine has an excellent network of career and college access counselors. For more information, visit a local Maine CareerCenter or contact the Maine Educational Opportunity Center (MEOC). MEOC offers a variety of useful career and college planning workshops throughout the state. It is also a good idea to meet with someone in the job placement office at the college(s) you are interested in attending. Advisors are skilled at helping students convert their ideas and dreams into a plan.

1-800-228-3734

## Researching Colleges

**“College” is a broad term used to refer to education beyond high school.** This includes trade school, community college, and public or private universities. When thinking about which school to attend, look at the colleges that offer the type of degree you are seeking.

It is recommended that you contact the college directly for specific information about available education programs; however, there are a number of websites where you can do some preliminary research.

### Types of Programs:

- **Certificate Program** - one year or less of full-time study
- **Associate Degree** - two years of full-time study
- **Bachelor’s Degree** - four years of full-time study
- **Master’s or Professional Degree** - generally two to four years of full-time study after completion of an undergraduate (bachelor’s) degree program








### Types of Schools:

- **Career and Trade Schools** - certificate programs
- **Community College** - certificate and associate degree programs
- **Public Colleges and Universities** - associate and bachelor’s degree programs; may offer master’s and professional degrees
- **Private Colleges and Universities** - associate and bachelor’s degree programs; may offer master’s and professional degrees

For a quick view of the colleges in Maine,  
check out FAME’s college search page.  
Looking for schools outside of Maine?  
Begin your search at one of the following sites:

collegenavigator.gov  
collegeboard.org  
zinch.com

## Things to Consider When Selecting a School

-  **Financial Aid** - Most schools offer federal student financial aid, but some do not. Those that don't offer financial aid are often attractive to adult students as they may offer flexible short-term schedules; however, they can be more expensive and, without financial aid, may not be affordable. If you are unsure whether a school offers federal financial aid, contact the school directly.
-  **Accreditation** - The goal of accreditation is to make sure that an educational program meets standards of quality that will allow credentials earned to be used for further education or employment. You can research school accreditation at the U.S. Department of Education Database of Accredited Postsecondary Education website: [ope.ed.gov/accreditation](http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation).
-  **Location** - A key factor when selecting a school is the school's location. Most adult students will choose from the schools that are located closest to them and Maine has an excellent selection of universities and community colleges located throughout the state.
-  **Affordability** - It is a good idea to look at public colleges and universities in your state of residence first. State colleges and universities offer reduced tuition rates for residents.
-  **Community College** - Community colleges offer low costs per credit hour, as well as excellent resources for adult students. Students planning to continue on to a bachelor's or higher degree may be able to transfer their community college credits into another program. It is important to work closely with both your current and future school when planning to transfer.
-  **Interactive Television (ITV)** - Many colleges offer ITV. ITV allows students to attend courses at off site locations throughout the state via an audio/video connection to the course as it is being conducted live. Students watch the course on a screen and may interact with the instructor by calling in questions and comments during the class.
-  **Online Course Work** - It is also becoming more common for schools to offer courses and programs that are completed either in part or entirely online. This is a great option for working students; however, a good computer and reliable internet connection as well as a great deal of self-motivation and a disciplined approach are required.

## Preparing for College

**Maine Adult Education** is one way for students to begin their journey to college. Students who are not academically prepared for college courses or just need to brush up on skills can benefit from preparatory coursework offered at affordable rates through adult education. Adult education counselors also help students with the process of obtaining their HiSET or adult high school diploma. In addition, many programs offer business and training courses in which individuals can gain valuable skills for today's workforce and explore various career pathways.

**Maine College Transitions Program (MCT)** is a comprehensive program of study leading to enrollment in a postsecondary institution. MCT partners with Maine Educational Opportunity Center, Maine Centers for Women, Work, and Community, Maine CareerCenter, and other local agencies to provide participants with assessment services, academic preparation, college and career planning, and financial aid assistance. Services are offered through local adult education programs and include counseling, mentoring and support services to enable adults to successfully transition to college.

For more information, visit [maineadulted.org](http://maineadulted.org).





## Four Steps to Financial Aid

# 1

### Step One – Prepare ✓

- Know the financial aid deadlines at the colleges you are interested in attending. Financial aid funds are limited, so be sure to **file your FAFSA on time!**
- Go to **fafsa4caster.ed.gov** and get an early estimate of financial aid.
- To determine your estimated cost, use the Net Price Calculator on the website of the schools to which you are applying.
- Talk to a financial aid counselor.

# 2

### Step Two - Apply ✓

- Complete the FAFSA online at **fafsa.gov**.
- Submit the FAFSA as soon after January 1 as possible, or as soon as you decide to go to college.
- Don't wait until your taxes are completed; use estimated tax information and make changes later. If possible, use the IRS data retrieval option.
- Print and save your confirmation page.
- The FAFSA is **free**. Don't pay anyone to submit your FAFSA.

# 3

### Step Three - Follow-Up ✓

- Carefully review your FAFSA Student Aid Report (SAR) for accuracy. If you used estimated tax information, verify the figures and make corrections at **fafsa.gov**.
- Your Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is calculated based on the information you provide on the FAFSA and will be listed on your SAR. The EFC is not necessarily the amount that you can expect to pay for college.
- The colleges you list on your FAFSA will receive your FAFSA information electronically.
- Many colleges require additional forms such as tax transcripts or W-2's. **Be sure to respond quickly to all requests for information.**

# 4

### Step Four – Receive & Respond ✓

- Once you have been accepted for admission at the college, you will receive a financial aid award. Many colleges begin sending (or emailing) financial aid awards in mid-March. Contact the financial aid office if you have questions about the status of your award.
- Carefully review your award, including the types of aid that you have been offered. Typically, you will need to respond to the college or provide additional information.
- Contact the financial aid office at your college if there are changes to your family's financial circumstances, such as unemployment or reduced work hours.

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## Types of Financial Aid

Financial aid is available to adult students who are enrolled either full-time or part-time and comes from a variety of sources. Here is an overview of the types of financial aid:

**Scholarships & Grants** are considered gift aid, which means they do not need to be repaid under normal circumstances. The most common types of gift aid are:

- **Federal Pell Grant**
- **State of Maine Grant Program**
- **Institutional Grants or Scholarships**
- **Private Scholarships**

**Work-Study** is a program that provides part-time employment for students to work and earn funds either on or off campus to help pay for college expenses.

**Loans** must be repaid, usually with interest. Before applying, evaluate each program carefully to understand your terms and conditions. The most common types of loans are:

- **Federal Direct Stafford Loan**
- **Federal Perkins Loan**
- **Federal Direct Parent PLUS Loan**
- **Federal Direct Grad PLUS Loan**

### Graduate and Professional Students

The financial aid process is the same for graduate students as it is for undergraduate students. Review **“Four Steps to Financial Aid”** on page 7 for more information. The types of financial aid differ for graduate and undergraduate students. For example:

- Graduate student financial aid typically consists of loans.
- Most grant and scholarship funds are awarded to undergraduate students. However, there are some graduate scholarships available, but are often specific to a field of study and/or institution. Complete an online scholarship search such as those listed on page 10.
- Graduate assistantships and/or fellowships provide valuable work experience and help offset the cost of college. Contact your college for more information.
- Most loan programs require a minimum of half-time enrollment to be eligible for funding, which may only be one course per semester for graduate students. Contact your college for more information.

### *What if my financial aid doesn't cover my bill?*

After you receive your financial aid award, you will have a better sense of whether or not you'll have enough money to cover your educational expenses. For additional help, review **“Paying the Bill”** and **“Reducing Expenses”** on pages 11 and 13, respectively.

### Helpful Tip:

Use FAME's online student loan/salary calculator to estimate what you can afford to borrow.

## College Financing for Military Students and Families

There are numerous education benefits available to military students. Your spouse and children might even be able to use the benefits. Some benefits require that you take action while enlisted, and other benefits have time limits and may expire. Visit the GI Bill website at [benefits.va.gov/gibill](http://benefits.va.gov/gibill) to start learning about the programs available to you. **Applications can take time to process, so start early!**

Apply for financial aid using the **“Four Steps to Financial Aid”** process on page 7. Financial aid can help pay for college costs that are not covered by military education benefits. You can also use financial aid to cover the college bill while waiting for your benefits to be processed.

Be sure you contact the office or person that processes veterans benefits at the college you will attend. They will explain the steps required to receive your benefits and can help you with the paperwork. This office might also be able to help you with the admissions process and academic transfer services.

Apply for scholarships using the sites and resources listed on page 10, as well as online scholarship searches specifically for military families, such as the scholarship search at [military.com/education](http://military.com/education).

For more information and resources for military students and families, visit FAME's Military Students and Families web page.



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## Applying for Scholarships

Each year **thousands of scholarships** are made available to qualified students. Scholarships have a broad range of eligibility criteria and are based on a variety of factors such as academics, future career plans, ethnicity, or extracurricular activities. **Many scholarships are available just for nontraditional students.**

### Maine-Based Scholarship Searches

- Finance Authority of Maine  
FAMemaine.com/Education
- The Maine Community Foundation  
mainecf.org

### National Scholarship Searches

- collegeboard.org
- collegetoolkit.com
- fastweb.com
- zinch.com

### Other Places to Consider

- **Groups and organizations** that you or your immediate family members belong to may offer scholarships for their members. Scholarships from these organizations are often not well publicized so it's best to contact the organization directly for more information.
- **Employers** sometimes have scholarships and/or tuition benefits for employees or their family members. Contact the human resources office of the employer to check for this information.
- **Check with the financial aid office at your college** and also check with your college advisor and/or the dean of your educational program.
- **Apply for as many scholarships as you can**, since a focused effort to fill out as many scholarship applications as possible tends to yield a better outcome.



These are FREE searches. It is important that you do not pay any fees for the information or application processing.

## Paying the Bill

If you have a balance owed on your college account, contact the financial aid office to discuss financing options and ways to receive more financial aid in the future. **Also, be sure to report any special financial circumstances or changes in your financial situation.** In addition to your financial aid award, consider the following financing options:

- **Family Development Accounts (FDA's)** - A great option for income eligible adults planning ahead for college expenses. These accounts provide a match on savings for certain specific purposes such as education. For more information on FDA's, contact Women, Work and Community at [womenworkandcommunity.org](http://womenworkandcommunity.org).
- **Tuition Payment Plans** - Many colleges offer tuition payment plans to help students finance their education. Contact your school for more information.
- **A Section 529 Plan** - A state-administered investment plan to help students and families prepare for college expenses. For information on Maine's Section 529 Plan known as the NextGen College Investing Plan®, visit FAME's website. For other information on preparing for college expenses, visit [finaid.org/savings](http://finaid.org/savings).
- **Alternative Student Loans** - These credit-based education loans may be obtained through a lender. Interest rates and loan terms vary. **Alternative loans are not federal student loans** and do not have the same repayment or cancellation provisions as federal loans and should be used only as a last resort.
- **Education Tax Benefits** - There are a variety of tax benefits that may be available to you if you are saving for or paying education costs for yourself or, in many cases, another student who is a member of your immediate family. Most benefits apply only to higher education. For additional information on available tax credits and deductions, see *IRS Publication 970 - Tax Benefits for Education*.

### Important Reminders About Student Loans

- Take advantage of federal student loans first.
- Never borrow more than you need to pay for your educational expenses.
- Don't borrow more than you can afford to repay.

## Track Your Expenses and Create a Budget

Now is a good time to track your expenses and develop a budget. FAME has a variety of tools and resources to help you manage your money and make your budget work! Use the following worksheet to track your expenses.

Savings – pay yourself first!	\$
School-related expenses, such as tuition, books and supplies	\$
Housing (rent, mortgage, dorm, etc.)	\$
Food (groceries or meal plan)	\$
Utilities (heat, water, electricity)	\$
Telephone/cable/internet	\$
Transportation (gas, car payment)	\$
Insurance (car, health, renters)	\$
Child care	\$
Loan/credit card payments	\$
Snacks/coffee/dining out	\$
Clothes	\$
Entertainment	\$
Other	\$
<b>Total Monthly Income</b>	\$
<b>Total Monthly Expenses</b>	-
<b>Remaining Balance</b>	=

If your remaining balance is zero or if your expenses are greater than your income, challenge yourself to explore ways to reduce your expenses or increase your income.

## Reducing Expenses

For most students, the financial aid award does not cover the entire cost of education. **Before borrowing any type of loan, consider the following cost-cutting measures:**

- Enrollment** - Can you take fewer classes for a semester? This may be an option if your tuition is calculated per credit hour. Be sure to discuss this with your financial aid office, as taking fewer classes may decrease your financial aid.
- Books** - Start your textbook shopping early and shop online or consider renting books. Be sure to look for used textbooks at the school's bookstore.
- Prior Learning Assessment** - You may be able to receive college credit for skills and knowledge that you already possess. Contact your academic advisor for more information.
- Cell Phones and Cable** - Can you eliminate some of the extras, such as cable? Do you pay excess fees for text messaging and can you *really* afford your cell phone plan? Do you need a cell phone and a land line? Can you use prepaid wireless?
- Travel** - Can you share a ride with another student to save on commuting costs? Be sure to take advantage of public transportation whenever possible.
- Housing** - Are there ways that you might be able to reduce your rent or mortgage costs? Have you considered a roommate? Are you getting the best deal for renters or home owners insurance?
- Food** - Are you eating out regularly? Do you pack a lunch, or make your own coffee? Do you buy in bulk when possible, cut coupons and shop for sale items?
- Utilities** - Are there ways to reduce your electricity, heating, water or other utility expenses? Do you turn down your thermostat when you aren't at home? Do you turn off the lights when you leave the room?
- Banking** - Most banks offer free checking and some allow you to earn interest on your savings and checking accounts. Even if the bank you use doesn't charge fees, be sure to avoid costly overdraft charges.
- State Financial Assistance** - You may be eligible for help with childcare, housing, and other costs. The State of Maine has a 211 hotline (dial 2-1-1) that refers Maine residents to the appropriate service.

**Complete an annual "check-up" of your regular monthly expenses, such as insurance, cable and cell phones, as there may be lower cost options that could save you hundreds of dollars!**

## Additional Resources

**2-1-1 State of Maine Hotline** - phone 2-1-1 or online at **211maine.org** - connects people in Maine to a full range of health and human services available in their community.

**360 Degrees of Financial Literacy** - **360financialliteracy.org** - personal finance for every stage of life.

**Finance Authority of Maine** - **FAMEmaine.com** - financial aid process, college planning, scholarship search, career and college exploration, state education financing programs and money management tools and resources.

**Maine CareerCenter** - **mainecareercenter.com** - training programs and opportunities.

**Maine College Transition Program** - **mct.maineadulted.org** - academic preparation, counseling, mentoring and support services.

**Maine Educational Opportunity Center** - **meoc.maine.edu** - admissions and financial aid assistance and career exploration.

**Maine Educational Opportunity Tax Credit** (Opportunity Maine) - **opportunitymaine.org** - tax credit for students who earn an associate or bachelor's degree at a Maine school and continue to live and work in Maine after graduation.

**Military.com** - **military.com** - easy to understand comprehensive site that provides information on all types of military education benefits.

**My Money** - **mymoney.gov** - U.S. government's financial education site.

**National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS)** - **nslds.ed.gov** - view and obtain lender contact information for your past and current federal student loans.

**Occupational Information Network (O\*NET)** - **onetonline.org** - career exploration.

**Student Aid on the Web** - **studentaid.ed.gov** - U.S. Department of Education website on preparing for and funding education beyond high school.

**Tax Benefits for Higher Education** - **irs.gov/individuals/students** - IRS tax information for students.

**Women, Work and Community** - **womenworkandcommunity.org** - training, advocacy and assistance with building careers, starting a business, managing money and becoming a leader.

*This information is provided as a service to the reader. The Finance Authority of Maine is not responsible for the content of any of these websites except its own.*



## Getting Ready for College Check List

- Discuss your educational goals with your family
- Research careers
- Research colleges
- Get control of your finances - prepare a budget
- Take a study skills course and/or refresh your reading/writing/math skills
- File the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Meet with advisor(s) at the school(s) you are interested in attending
- Complete placement testing requirements
- Request copies of your high school/college transcripts
- Complete and submit college applications AND follow-up with the admissions office
- Search and apply for scholarships
- Organize your time - study, work, and recreation
- Organize your materials - notebooks, folders, books, etc.
- Check the condition of your computer, internet connection, and connection to online course site (if applicable)
- Follow-up regularly with your family to discuss:
  - Your course schedule;
  - Your plan to study - when, where and what you need from them;
  - Reallocation of household chores; and
  - Your plan to play (free time) - let them know when you'll be available.



# FAME

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Visit FAME's website today!  
[FAMEmaine.com/Education](http://FAMEmaine.com/Education)



## Continuing Your Education

Resources to balance work, life and family.



## Financial Aid

A step-by-step guide on how to apply for and receive financial aid.



## Scholarships

Start your search with FAME's Maine-based scholarship search program.



## Maine Financial Aid

The State of Maine offers several programs to Maine residents.



## Tools & Calculators

Useful tools created to help students plan and pay for college.

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[FAMEmaine.com](http://FAMEmaine.com)







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August 2014