

# Students strive to graduate debt-free

Just half of Americans still see college as a "good investment."

By Meagan Pant  
Staff Writer

Doug Schantz often sees a "deer in the headlights" look on the faces of future college students and their families who come to him for advice on paying for college.

Finding the right academic program that will lead to a job, at the right college and at the right price can be complicated: Today, Americans are making those decisions while facing a "confidence crisis" about higher education brought on by a tight job market and record student loan debt that now exceeds \$1 trillion nationwide.

Just half of Americans said they think college is "still a good investment" in 2013, compared to 81 percent in 2008, according to the recent COUNTRY Financial Security Index.

"I was encountering families who just felt in over their heads when they were looking at sticker prices at colleges and universities



Ellie Entner, a junior at Cedarville University, works in the university's financial aid office to help pay for her education. BILL LACKEY/STAFF

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» We offer tips for keeping college costs low, A2

## Students look to cut costs

### College debt

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and thinking about not just getting one child through, but maybe three children," said Schantz, director of student accounts at Wittenberg University.

"It's still foreign territory to them," he said. "They don't know what all is available."

Schantz launched CheapScholar.org in 2010 to offer free help. He has a long list of tips, but the first step, he said, is to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid — commonly called the FAFSA.

"That's the gateway to accessing financial aid," he said. "That kicks off the rest of everything when it comes to paying for college and accessing free money."

### Average debt is \$28,683

Casey O'Brien was almost singularly focused on avoiding debt when he was selecting a college.

"I sat down with my parents and looked at the schools," he said. "They basically reasoned with me from the financial perspective."

O'Brien, a Springfield native, chose Wittenberg and graduated this year with no student loans.

That placed him in the minority. About 68 percent of college students in Ohio borrow to pay for their education, according to the Project on Student Debt.

Ohio ranks seventh in the nation for the amount its student borrow: \$28,683 by the time they graduate, the nonprofit found. That amount is up nearly \$9,500 from the class of 2005.

The growing student loan debt has the attention of the public, lawmakers and even President Barack Obama. And more than ever, students are watching it too.

College debt continued on A2

"It used to be that only parents might be concerned about that, but we get students asking those types of questions now too," said Brandi Lee, coordinator of financial aid for Miami Middletown.

O'Brien, who majored in journalism, followed many of the tips experts offer on controlling costs: He sought out scholarships and won them to defray Wittenberg's annual \$37,230 tuition bill; entered Wittenberg with nearly a semester's worth of credits from taking Advanced Placement classes in high school; avoided the annual \$10,000 charge for room and board by living at home; and worked odd jobs and part-time while in college at Dairy Queen.

He said he was lucky enough to have his parents and grandmother to help fill the gap between financial aid and the total cost of living and studying. That is allowing him to continue his education at the University of Cincinnati law school this fall, he said.

"It's really unfortunate what's going on today, the situation that students are placed in," he said. "It's really bleak and it's sad because you have passions in one area and then you have to forgo those passions because of realities."

#### 'Too expensive'

Ohio students take

many different paths in order to save on their college degrees.

Sutton Smith said he chose the University of Dayton for law school because the private school offers a rare two-year program.

"I was making money and I was going to stop making money in school," he said. "The option to get the degree in two years, as opposed to three, meant one fewer year borrowing for living expenses and one year earlier into the job market."

Trevor Williams and April Jones are saving about \$10,000 a year on tuition by starting their studies at Miami University's regional campuses. Ohio students overall saved nearly \$37 million in 2010 by transferring their credits from less expensive public schools or campuses to more expensive ones, according to the Board of Regents.

Full-time students pay \$2,536 to \$3,833 for tuition at Miami's regional campuses, compared to \$13,266 at the Oxford campus.

Williams, a zoology student from West Chester Twp., said he had considered an out-of-state school but was turned off by the high tuition, which is typically at least double.

"It was just way too expensive," he said.

Jones, a 53-year-old who just returned to Ohio from Texas, said she is

happy to save by taking as many classes in Middletown as she can.

"As a nontraditional student, I feel it's a good way to slowly put your feet back in the water of the academic world," said Jones, who is studying finance and creative writing.

Cedarville University junior Ellie Entner said her goal is to graduate with less than \$10,000 in loans, and she is on track. The Cedarville native is living off-campus to save money and focused on applying for scholarships before entering school.

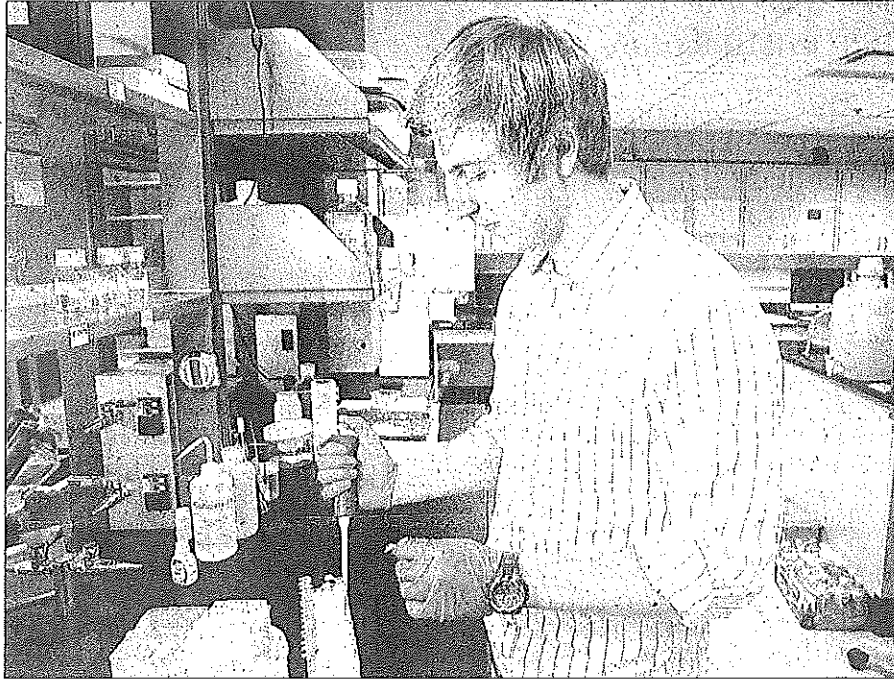
She estimates she cut her college costs by \$40,000 with scholarships; saved \$20,000 by living off campus; and avoided \$20,000 in loans by working during the summer and school year.

"I rent or buy my books secondhand, splurge as little as possible and kept careful track of my budget," she said.

"I can see how easily debt could snowball into something monstrous," she said.

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Miami University Zoology major Trevor Williams, of Liberty Twp. has also taken classes at Miami University Hamilton to save on education costs. GREG LYNCH / STAFF

## TIPS ON CUTTING COLLEGE COSTS

■ **Step one: Fill out the FAFSA.** It is the only way to qualify for federal financial aid, including the Pell Grant, which is worth up to \$5,500 and does not have to be repaid. It is free to fill out the FAFSA at [fafsa.ed.gov](http://fafsa.ed.gov). Cedarville Financial Aid Director Kim Jenerette said states also use this form in awarding financial aid. "While the eligibility for federal grants is based upon lower income and assets; state and institutional grants are much more 'friendly' and money is generally left on the table as families do not believe they would qualify," he said.

■ **Do your research.** Jenerette recommends Fastweb.com, where you can enter information on yourself (GPA, test scores, extra-curricular activities, involvement in church and community, etc.) and gets links to possible scholarships to research. "One scholarship is for 'left-handed athletes with asthma,'" Jenerette said. "You never know until you try." Some scholarships are also specific to your geographic area.

■ **Consider transferring.** Ohio students saved \$46M in 2010 by transferring classes from less expensive schools. Learn more online at [transfercredit.ohio.gov](http://transfercredit.ohio.gov).

■ **If you pay for it, use it.** Full-time

students at universities typically pay a flat rate for tuition whether they take 12 or 19 credit hours, said Doug Schantz, founder of CheapScholar.org. Taking 19 credit hours can help you shave off a semester, which saves you tuition and living expenses and helps you enter the workforce sooner. Also, measure that meal plan you need so you are not eating out and paying for meals on campus.

■ **Get a part-time job on campus.** "You can earn approximately \$6,100 throughout the year and it will not affect eligibility when completing the FAFSA,"

Jenerette said. Schantz said that could include being an resident advisor, which typically covers the cost of housing and could include a stipend.

■ **Take summer classes.** Some schools, Wittenberg included, offer cheaper tuition on summer courses, Schantz said. On-camps housing and food costs are also reduced, he said.

■ **Study your budget.** Use your campus ID card for discounts. Get rid of your car if you don't need to cut gas, insurance and parking from your budget. Save 60 percent on textbooks by renting through sites such as [bookrenter.com](http://bookrenter.com), Schantz said.