



## [Why College Debt Is Not All Bad](#)

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January is the time when most high school seniors start applying to colleges. Many Latino students - and their families - shy away from taking out loans for their higher education to avoid debt. Some education experts say this might not be the best idea. "Loans can help students go from part-time to full-time, and research shows this increases students' chances of completing college," says Deborah Santiago, co-founder and Vice President of [Excelencia in Education](#), a non-profit focused on improving Latino academic and educational success. Santiago explains that while it is admirable for a Latino student to take one or two classes and then head out to a 10 or 20-hour-a-week job, the danger is these students might take very long to graduate, if at all.

"The more time you spend on campus, the more you benefit from a college's resources, including tutoring, support services and networking" says Santiago. She adds that while attending college or community-college full-time might seem so much more expensive, "if you can buckle down 4 years or 2 full-time years in the end you can save a lot of money because you get out into the world faster and start earning a higher salary," explains Santiago.

The main challenge, however, is to make sure Latino families know what resources are out there and how to utilize them.

"For Latino families, sending their children to college is their number one dream," says Ana María Soto, Director of Educational Programming for [New Futuro](#), a new Chicago-based company which has a website with easy-to-navigate information on college advice, how to fill out financial aid forms and how to find scholarships. "We try to empower parents and students with the information they need."

Soto and Santiago have several tips for families as they navigate the world of college - and how to pay for it.

**Inform yourself** – Visit websites such as [New Futuro](#), [Hispanic Scholarship Fund](#), [Hispanic College Fund](#) and [Department of Education](#) websites for information on planning for college and how to fill out financial aid forms.

**Fill out the FAFSA now** - The [FAFSA](#) (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is what institutions use to determine how much money a family makes and how much aid might be available. Soto recommends filling it out early. "Money is limited, so families should try to put in the applications early."

**Beware of fraud** - “Filling out the FAFSA is free, “says Soto. “No one should be charging you to fill out financial aid forms, and beware of anyone who says you should send them money in exchange for a scholarship,” adds Soto. Find websites like those listed above, or seek help from your high school’s guidance office.

**Apply for scholarships/grants** - Many families do not realize that because of family income or a student’s grades, he or she might qualify for scholarships and grants, which do not have to be repaid. Experts advise you visit a local college’s office of financial aid; they might give you an idea of what is available.

**Always look for federal loans first** - Federal student loans have low interest rates, Santiago says, and some of them allow full-time students to get interest-free loans while they are in college full-time. Private loans might give you more money, but their interest rates are higher, and that is when many student and their families get in trouble.

**Consider different types of institutions** - Some families might be afraid to consider private colleges, says Santiago, thinking they would be too expensive. However, some private institutions have generous financial aid for low income students, and students have better graduation rates in these schools. On the other hand, public universities are less expensive and might be the better option for some families.

Experts agree figuring out how to pay for college is daunting, but like New Futuro’s Soto says, “you have to dream big, and create a dream team around you – counselors, teachers, professionals – to help make it happen.”

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<http://www.educationnation.com/index.cfm?objectid=06B02E66-363D-11E1-B607000C296BA163&aka=0>