October 2018 Newsletter

Korbitz Financial Planning

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Clients and Friends: The first article in this newsletter focuses on financial mistakes people make at various stages in their lives. It is intended to make you aware of things to watch for in the future. The remainder of the newsletter focuses on college cost issues, which is particularly relevant this time of year, as students are applying to college.

I am going to use the rest of this space for what I view to be a critical national issue. That is, to urge you to vote.

If there is one thing that could help reduce the division in our country, it would be to have a national election with 100% voter turnout. The results would then be very clear.

Our nationwide mid-term election for all House Representatives, 1/3 of the US Senate and many state and local offices will be held on November 6th.

Regardless of your political persuasion, left, right or center, I urge you to vote next month.

Please let me know if you have any questions about anything in this newsletter.

Happy Halloween!

Eric

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A Parent-Child Conversation About College Costs

The College Landscape After Tax Reform

When should I submit college financial aid forms?

What's so great about a college net price calculator?

Have You Made Any of These Financial Mistakes?

As people move through different stages of life, there are new financial opportunities — and potential pitfalls — around every corner. Have you made any of these mistakes?

Your 50s and 60s

1. Raiding your home equity or retirement funds. It goes without saying that doing so will prolong your debt and/or reduce your nest egg.

2. Not quantifying your expected retirement income. As you near retirement, you should know how much money you (and your spouse, if applicable) can expect from three sources:

- Your retirement accounts such as 401(k) plans, 403(b) plans, and IRAs
- Pension income from your employer, if any
- Social Security (at age 62, at your full retirement age, and at age 70)

3. Co-signing loans for adult children. Co-signing means you're 100% on the hook if your child can't pay, a less-than-ideal situation as you're getting ready to retire.

4. Living an unhealthy lifestyle. Take steps now to improve your diet and fitness level. Not only will you feel better today, but you may reduce your health-care costs in the future.

Your 40s

1. Trying to keep up with the Joneses. Appearances can be deceptive. The nice lifestyle your friends, neighbors, or colleagues enjoy might look nice on the outside, but behind the scenes there may be a lot of debt supporting that lifestyle. Don't spend money you don't have trying to keep up with others.

2. Funding college over retirement. In your 40s, saving for your children's college costs at the expense of your own retirement may be a mistake. If you have limited funds, consider setting aside a portion for college while earmarking the majority for retirement. Then sit down with your teenager and have a frank discussion about college options that won't break the bank — for either of you.

3. Not having a will or an advance medical directive. No one likes to think about death or catastrophic injury, but these documents can help your loved ones immensely if something unexpected should happen to you.

Your 30s

1. Being house poor. Whether you're buying your first home or trading up, think twice about buying a house you can't afford, even if the bank says you can. Build in some wiggle room for a possible dip in household income that could result from leaving the workforce to raise a family or a job change or layoff.

2. Not saving for retirement. Maybe your 20s passed you by in a bit of a blur and retirement wasn't even on your radar. But now that you're in your 30s, it's essential to start saving for retirement. Start now, and you still have 30 years or more to save. Wait much longer, and it can be very hard to catch up.

3. Not protecting yourself with life and disability insurance. Life is unpredictable. Consider what would happen if one day you were unable to work and earn a paycheck. Life and disability insurance can help protect you and your family. Though the cost and availability of life insurance will depend on several factors including your health, generally the younger you are when you buy life insurance, the lower your premiums will be.

Your 20s

1. Living beyond your means. It's tempting to splurge on gadgets, entertainment, and travel, but if you can't pay for most of your wants up front, then you need to rein in your lifestyle, especially if you have student loans to repay.

2. Not paying yourself first. Save a portion of every paycheck first and then spend what's left over, not the other way around. And why not start saving for retirement, too? Earmark a portion of your annual pay now for retirement and your 67-year-old self will thank you.

3. Being financially illiterate. Learn as much as you can about saving, budgeting, and investing now and you could benefit from it for the rest of your life.

A Parent-Child Conversation About College Costs

A weighty decision

Most teens are not financially experienced enough to drive a $100,000 or $200,000 decision, especially one that has the potential to impact them for most or all of their 20s or longer. So parent guidance is critical.

If you're the parent of a high school student who's looking ahead to college, it's important to have a grown-up conversation with your child about college costs. A frank discussion can help both of you get on the same page, optimize the college search process, and avoid getting blindsided by large college bills.

An initial conversation: a, b, and c

As a parent, you need to take the lead in this conversation because most 16-, 17-, and 18-year-olds are not financially experienced enough to drive a $100,000 or $200,000 decision. One approach is to start off saying something like: "We will have saved 'a' when it's time for you to start college, and after that we should be able to contribute 'b' each year, and we expect you to contribute 'c' each year." That will give you a baseline of affordability when you start targeting colleges.

A more in-depth conversation: borrow x, pay back y

Once you start looking at colleges, you'll see that prices vary, sometimes significantly. If a college costs more than a + b + c above, you'll have to fill the gap. The best way to try and do this is with college grants or scholarships (more on that in a minute). Absent grant aid, you'll need to consider loans. And here is where you should have a more detailed conversation with your child in which you say: "If you borrow 'x' you will need to pay back 'y' each month after graduation." Otherwise, random loan figures probably won't mean much to a teenager.

You can use an online calculator to show your child *exactly* what different loan amounts will cost each month over a standard 10-year repayment term. For example, if College 1 will require your child to borrow a total of $16,000 at 5%, that will cost $170 each month for 10 years. If College 2 requires $24,000 in loans, that will cost $255 each month. A loan amount of $36,000 for College 3 will cost $382 per month, and $50,000 for College 4 will cost $530 a month, and so on. The idea is to take an abstract loan amount and translate it into a month-to-month reality.

But don't stop there. Put that monthly loan payment into a larger context by reminding your child about other financial obligations he or she will have after college, such as a cell phone bill, food, rent, utilities, car insurance. For example, you might say: "If you attend College 3 and have a student loan payment of $382 every month, you'll also need to budget $40 a month for your phone, $75 for car insurance, $400 for food..." and so on. The goal is to help your child understand the cost of real-world expenses and the long-term financial impact of choosing a more expensive college that will require more loans.

Even with a detailed discussion, though, many teenagers may not be able to grasp how their future lives will be impacted by student loans. Ultimately, it's up to you — as a parent — to help your child avoid going into too much debt. How much is too much? The answer is different for every family. One frequently stated guideline is for students to borrow no more than what they expect to earn in their first year out of college. But this amount may be too high if assumptions about future earnings don't pan out.

To build in room for the unexpected, a safer approach might be to borrow no more than the federal government's Direct Loan limit, which is currently a total of $27,000 for four years of college ($5,500 freshman year, $6,500 sophomore year, and $7,500 junior and senior years). Federal loans are generally preferable to private loans because they come with an income-based repayment option down the road that links a borrower's monthly payment to earned income if certain requirements are met. Whatever loan amount you settle on as being within your range, before committing to a college, your child should understand the total amount of borrowing required and the resulting monthly payment after graduation. In this way, you and your child can make an informed financial decision.

If there's any silver lining here, it's that parents believe their children may get more out of college when they are at least partly responsible for its costs, as opposed to having a blank check mentality. Being on the hook financially, even for just a small amount, may encourage your child to choose courses carefully, hit the books sufficiently, and live more frugally. Later, if you have the resources, you can always help your child repay his or her student loans.

Target the right colleges

To reduce the need to borrow, spend time researching colleges that offer grants to students whose academic profile your child matches. Colleges differ in their aid generosity. You can use a net price calculator — available on every college website — to get an estimate of how much grant aid your child can expect at different colleges. For example, one college may have a sticker price of $62,000 but might routinely offer $30,000 in grant aid, resulting in an out-of-pocket cost of $32,000. Another college might cost $40,000 but offer only $5,000 in grant aid, resulting in a higher $35,000 out-of-pocket cost.

The College Landscape After Tax Reform

Note: Investors should consider the investment objectives, risks, charges, and expenses associated with 529 plans and ABLE plans before investing. Specific information can be found in each plan's official statement. Participating in a 529 plan or ABLE plan may involve investment risk, including the possible loss of principal, and there is no guarantee that any investment strategy will be successful. Investments may not perform well enough to cover college costs as anticipated. As with other investments, there are generally fees and expenses associated with participation in a 529 savings plan, and each plan has its own rules and restrictions, which can change at any time. Before investing in a 529 plan or an ABLE plan, consider whether your state offers residents favorable state tax benefits, and whether those benefits are contingent on joining the in-state plan. Other state benefits for 529 plans may include financial aid, scholarship funds, and protection from creditors.

College students and their parents dodged a major bullet with the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. Initial drafts of the bill included the elimination of Coverdell Education Savings Accounts, the Lifetime Learning Credit, and the student loan interest deduction, along with the taxation of tuition waivers, which are used primarily by graduate students and college employees. In the end, none of these provisions made it into the final legislation. But a few other college-related items did. These changes take effect in 2018.

529 plans expanded

The new law expands the definition of 529 plan "qualified education expenses" to include K-12 tuition. Starting in 2018, annual withdrawals of up to $10,000 per student can be made from a 529 college savings plan for tuition expenses related to enrollment at a K-12 public, private, or religious school (excluding home schooling). Such withdrawals are now tax-free at the federal level.

At the state level, some states automatically update their state 529 legislation to align with federal 529 legislation, but other states will need to take legislative action to include K-12 tuition as a qualified education expense. In addition, 529 plan institutional managers will likely further refine their rules to accommodate the K-12 expansion and communicate these rules to existing account owners. Parents who are interested in making a K-12 contribution or withdrawal should understand their plan's rules and their state's tax rules.

The expansion of 529 plans may impact Coverdell Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). Coverdell ESAs let families save up to $2,000 per year for a child's K-12 or college expenses. Up until now, they were the only option for tax-advantaged K-12 savings. But now the use of Coverdell ESAs may decline as parents are likely to prefer the much higher lifetime contribution limits of 529 plans — generally $350,000 and up — over the $2,000 annual limit for Coverdell accounts. In addition, Coverdell ESA contributions can only be made for children under age 18.

Coverdell ESAs do have one important advantage over 529 plans, though: investment flexibility. Coverdell owners have a wide variety of options in terms of what investments they hold in their accounts, and may generally change investments as often as they wish. By contrast, 529 account owners can invest only in the investment portfolios offered by the plan, and they can change their existing plan investments only twice per year.

In addition, the new tax law allows 529 account owners to roll over (transfer) funds from a 529 account to an ABLE account without federal tax consequences if certain requirements are met. An ABLE account is a tax-advantaged account that can be used to save for disability-related expenses for individuals who become blind or disabled before age 26. Like 529 plans, ABLE plans allow funds to accumulate tax deferred, and withdrawals are tax-free when used for a qualified expense.

New calculation for kiddie tax

The tax reform law changes the way the "kiddie tax" is calculated. Previously, a child's unearned income over a certain amount was taxed at the parents' rate. Under the new law, a child's unearned income over a certain amount ($2,100 in 2018) will be taxed using the compressed trust and estate income tax brackets. This change may make the use of UTMA/UGMA custodial accounts less attractive as a college savings vehicle due to the reduced opportunity for tax savings.

New tax on large college endowments

The tax law creates a new 1.4% tax on the net investment income of large college endowments. Specifically, the tax applies to institutions with at least 500 tuition-paying students and endowment assets of $500,000 or more per student. Approximately 30 colleges are expected to be swept up in this net in 2018, including top-ranked larger universities and smaller elite liberal arts colleges. Some affected colleges have publicly stated that the tax will limit their ability to fund certain programs, including financial aid programs.

Loss of personal exemptions

Starting in 2018, the tax law eliminates personal exemptions, which were $4,050 in 2017 for each individual claimed on a tax return. So on their 2018 tax returns (which will be completed in 2019), parents of college students will lose an exemption for each college student they claim. However, this loss may be at least partially offset by: (1) a larger standard deduction in 2018 of $24,000 for joint filers (up from $12,700 in 2017); $12,000 for single filers (up from $6,350 in 2017); and $18,000 for heads of household (up from $9,350 in 2017); and (2) a new family tax credit of $500 in 2018 for each dependent who is not a qualifying child (i.e., under age 17), which would include a dependent college student. The income thresholds to qualify for this credit (and the child tax credit) are significantly higher: up to $400,000 adjusted gross income for joint filers and up to $200,000 for all other filers.

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When should I submit college financial aid forms?

For the 2019-2020 school year, the federal government's financial aid form, the FAFSA, can be filed as early as October 1, 2018. It relies on current asset information and two-year-old income information from your 2017 tax return, which means you'll have the income data you need when you sit down to complete the form. This is a relatively new process. A few years ago, parents had to wait until after January 1 to file the FAFSA and use tax data for the year that had just ended, which forced them to scramble to complete their tax return in order to complete the FAFSA.

If you have a new or returning college student, it's a good idea to file the FAFSA as early as possible in the fall because some aid programs operate on a first-come, first-served basis. The deadline for filing the FAFSA is typically March or April and will vary by college. But don't wait until then. It's a good idea to submit any college aid forms as early as possible, too.

The FAFSA is a prerequisite for federal student loans, grants, and work-study. In addition, colleges typically require the FAFSA before distributing their own need-based aid and, in some cases, merit-based aid. Even in cases when you don't expect your child to qualify for need-based aid, there may be another reason to submit the FAFSA. All students attending college at least half-time are eligible for federal unsubsidized Direct Loans regardless of financial need. ("Unsubsidized" means the borrower, rather than the government, pays the interest that accrues during school, the grace period after graduation, and any deferment periods.) So if you want your child to have some "skin in the game" with a small loan, you'll need to file the FAFSA. (Loan amounts are capped each year: $5,500 freshman year, $6,500 sophomore year, and $7,500 junior and senior years.) What if you file the FAFSA but then change your mind about taking out a loan? Don't worry, you aren't locked in. Your child can always decline the loan after it's offered.

The FAFSA is available online at fafsa.ed.gov. In order to file it, you'll need to create an FSA ID if you haven't done so already (follow the online instructions). You'll need to resubmit the FAFSA each year, but fortunately you can use the built-in IRS Data Retrieval Tool to have your tax data electronically imported, which saves time and minimizes errors.

What's so great about a college net price calculator?

If you're saving for a child's college education, at some point you'll want to familiarize yourself with a college net price calculator, which is an invaluable tool for estimating financial aid and measuring a college's affordability. Available on every college website, a net price calculator gives families an estimate of how much grant aid a student might expect at a particular college based on his or her personal financial and academic profile and the college's specific criteria for awarding grant aid. A college's sticker price minus grant aid equals a family's "net" price, hence the name.

The idea behind a net price calculator is to give families who are researching colleges a more accurate picture of what their out-of-pocket costs are likely to be, rather than having them rely on a college's published sticker price. The figures quoted by a net price calculator aren't guarantees of grant aid, but the estimates are meant to be close, so running the numbers is an excellent way for parents to see what their net price might be at different colleges.

Keep in mind that each college has a different sticker price and formula for determining how much grant aid it distributes, so every calculator result will be different. For example, after entering identical financial and family information on three separate net price calculators, you might find that College A has a net price of $25,000 per year, College B has a net price of $30,000, and College C is $40,000.

A net price calculator typically asks for the following information: parent income and assets, student income and assets, and the number of children in the family, including how many will be in college at the same time. (Generally, the more children in college at the same time, the more grant aid.) It may also ask more detailed questions, such as a student's class rank and/or test scores, how much money parents have saved in employer retirement plans in the most recent tax year, current home equity, and how much parents expect to pay in health-care costs in the coming year.

A net price calculator typically takes about 10-15 minutes to complete and is time well spent. Typing "net price calculator" in the search bar of a college's website should direct you to it.