

## Tuition Solutions Now – the Company that Helps Take Mystery and Frustration Out of Financing College

by Linda Fridy

Steve Shapiro of Tuition Solutions Now has some good news for parents facing the specter of college expenses: It's not too late to plan and make changes to offset those rising costs. Of course, the sooner you start, the more you can save and prepare. Yet even parents of high school seniors can get help maximizing cash flow and filling out the daunting financial aid forms.

A long-time CPA and financial planner, Shapiro became his own first client when his children were in high school.

"As a financial planner, I'd been aware of and worked with clients on savings plans. ... I realized there was so much more to college planning than I had been exposed to," he said. "I realized there were a lot of other people in the same boat as I'm in."

This awareness led Shapiro to become a Certified College Planning Specialist. It's a rare focus, with fewer than 500 trained professionals working in the entire United States today.

"It makes me unique," he said, compared to other local financial planners.

### Personalizing a College Plan

Regardless of the student's age, Shapiro always starts by asking parents how they plan to pay for college. What have they saved? What kind of accounts? Are the grandparents planning to help?

With a younger child, he can direct families in choosing the right type of savings and in whose name it should be held, since that can make a difference in financial aid decisions. For older students he often looks at cash flow to increase money available for college bills, and can help evaluate if two years of junior college will free up enough money for a student to transfer to his or her desired school.

He noted that sometimes students with a number of Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits can enter college as sophomores, thereby saving on the amount of time and tuition needed for a degree.

He'll also help with aid forms to present the family seeking financing help to their best advantage.

"Most middle-class families assume they won't get anything, so they don't try. Although there are no guarantees, if you try you may get something," he encouraged.

He also noted that private universities want to see the aid forms before they offer scholarships. Families

problems in reporting for divorced families and those with a small business. "They just didn't know the rules."

The financial aid forms are not the only place Tuition Solutions can help.

"My background in taxes and accounting helps me work with small businesses. I can work with their accountants to do tax planning that could save money on the tax return," Shapiro said. "If we can save a family \$2,000, \$3,000, \$4,000, even

"Many of the top kids who graduate are all applying to the same schools, so it's very competitive," he said. Those students should also look at lesser-known schools that have strong programs in their interest area. "[Their] excellent grades and test scores put them at the top of the pack rather than in the middle."

Shapiro has also found that in certain circumstances a family can appeal a private university's aid decision to request more money. Again, the success will depend in part on how much the school wants the student on its campus. Other children's tuition costs, caring for elderly parents or high medical expenses can justify an appeal, he said.

### Don't Forget Mom and Dad

One aspect that can be left out of college planning is the long-term effect on the parents' savings.

"It's very easy for a family to spend so much money on college that they can't retire or have to work much longer," Shapiro said. "For many baby boomers, when their kids are done with school, they're approaching 60. They have to do college planning with that in mind."

Loans, the one form of financial help available to everyone, have the greatest impact on the future.

"As much as we plan, sometimes parents have to borrow," Shapiro said. "Then we look at what's the best way to borrow."

The golden days of low-interest college loans are past, he said, with rates currently hovering at 6-¾ percent for students and 8-½ percent for parents. Higher income families may not even be able to deduct that interest.

"Home equity loans can be the cheapest money," he said.

Each family's situation is unique, and Tuition Solutions Now helps identify options and make the appropriate choices. Steve Shapiro enjoys this work.

"It's very satisfying to help people," he said.

Tuition Solutions Now has offices in Soquel and Watsonville. For more information, visit the website [TuitionSolutionsNow.com](http://TuitionSolutionsNow.com) or call 831-465-1148. ■



Steve Shapiro of Tuition Solutions Now

shouldn't automatically write off private schools because of cost.

"Many private schools will offer merit-based aid to families to bring the cost down to that of a UC," he said. "This is a science to them; they really know what they're doing."

And that is what Tuition Solutions Now can offer families: someone who is just as familiar with the peculiarities of college financing.

### Tax Background Pays Off

Shapiro sees a number of parallels between tax preparation and college financing, including complicated forms. Get them wrong, and it could cost you in scholarships or financial aid.

"Many parents make some serious mistakes when they fill out those forms," he said. He's seen a number of

\$5,000 a year in taxes, that's as good as a scholarship."

### Students Can Also Make a Difference

Getting the forms right will only make a difference in aid if the school wants the student.

"For parents who start the process early enough, the child can do quite a bit to earn merit-based aid," he said. Good grades and test scores are only part of the formula. "It's important for kids to ask themselves, 'How can I set myself apart?'"

Students who have given back to the community or can show how they've pursued a passion stand out, he said.

Even the highest achieving students aren't guaranteed acceptance or scholarships to elite schools, he warned.