

Understanding Gap Financing Options: PLUS Loan for Graduate Students and Private Student Loans

Many graduate students are considering financing their education with either Federal Graduate PLUS Loans or private student loans. The comparison chart below will help you understand the features and benefits of each type of loan.

Interest rates and fees for private loans vary from lender to lender based on the credit of the individual borrower and cosigner. We recommend that you research private loans before deciding which type of loan is best for you. Remember, applying for a private student loan does not obligate you to accept it and typically shopping for a loan has minimal impact on your credit score.

	PLUS Loan for Graduate Students ¹	School-Certified Private Student Loan ²
Whose name is on the loan?	Student	Student and cosigner (if applicable)
Cosigner requirement	No. If the student has adverse credit history an endorser may be required.	No, but if you're a student with little or no credit history, it may be difficult for you to qualify for a loan without a creditworthy cosigner. Having a cosigner may also help a borrower qualify and obtain a better rate.
Cosigner release option	No. The student, and any endorser, is making a commitment to repay the loan for the life of the loan.	Yes. Many lenders provide a cosigner release option where the student can apply to release the cosigner after he or she graduates, makes a specified number of on-time payments and meets underwriting requirements.
Interest rate	6.84% for Academic Year 2015-16 loans.	Many lenders offer both variable and fixed interest rates. Rates for graduate students range from 2.25% to 10.42% for variable and 4.00% to 12.99% for fixed. Rates are typically based on the borrower and cosigner's credit history so those with good credit may qualify for a lower rate.
Origination/disbursement fees	4.292% for loans first disbursed on or after October 1, 2014 and before October 1, 2015. 4.272% for loans first disbursed on or after October 1, 2015 and before October 1, 2016.	Varies by lender—most offer 0%.
Borrower benefits	0.25 percentage point interest rate reduction for automatic debit enrollment.	Most lenders offer a 0.25 percentage point interest rate reduction for automatic debit enrollment. Additional benefits vary by lender (e.g., graduation rewards).
Repayment period	10–25 years	Varies by lender; typically terms of 5-15 years are offered.
Loan limits	Up to 100% of the cost of attendance minus other financial aid received.	Generally, up to 100% of the cost of attendance minus financial aid received. Lenders may impose limits based on various factors, and can have different loan limits for different loan programs.
Credit check required	Yes. Applicant or endorser cannot have an adverse credit history.	Yes. Loan approval and pricing is generally based on creditworthiness.
Minimum enrollment status	At least half time.	Varies by lender. Some offer loans to borrowers who are attending school less than half time.

	PLUS Loan for Graduate Students¹	School-Certified Private Student Loan²
Application process	Online through the Department of Education.	Online with lender.
Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) required	Yes. In addition to the FAFSA, some states/colleges require additional forms or applications for aid.	No. Students are not required to complete the FAFSA unless it is the policy of the school.
Minimum payment amount while the student is enrolled in school	PLUS loan payments are deferred during school and for 6 months after graduation (interest continues to accrue during this time and is added to the loan's principal balance when the deferment period ends).	Varies by lender. Many lenders allow private loan payments to be deferred while in school (interest accrues during this time and is added to the loan's principal balance when the deferment period ends). Many lenders offer options to make interest payments while in school.
Death and disability loan forgiveness	Yes. If the primary borrower dies, or becomes permanently and totally disabled, then the loan will be discharged if certain conditions are met.	Varies by lender. Some lenders waive the remaining balance in the event of the primary borrower's death or permanent and total disability.
Ability to consolidate through the Department of Education	Yes. The student can consolidate with other federal loans in their name.	No. Cannot be included with federal student loans.
Options for denied loans	If denied, the student may apply with an endorser (cosigner).	Student could apply with a different cosigner if the cosigner was denied, or apply with another private lender.
Repayment plans	PLUS loans for graduate students are eligible for graduated, income-based, income-contingent and extended repayment options, federal consolidation, pay as you earn, and some public service loan forgiveness options.	Most lenders have programs available to assist troubled borrowers, but they are discretionary and not part of the loan agreement.
Interest tax deductible	The student may be able to use the interest paid on the loan for a tax deduction, subject to IRS guidelines.	The student may be able to use the interest paid on the loan for a tax deduction, subject to IRS guidelines. Restrictions apply to loans for less-than-half-time enrollment.

¹ Federal student loan information was gathered on May 20, 2015 from <http://studentaid.ed.gov>; check this page for the most up-to-date information about federal student loans. Rates, fees, and availability of federal student loans are subject to change by the Federal Government.

² Interest rates, fees, terms, and borrower benefits based on a May 7, 2015 review of national school-certified private loan programs offered by publicly-traded companies or subsidiaries thereof. Private student loans that have variable rates may go up or down based on the changes of an underlying interest rate index.

EXPLORE FEDERAL LOANS AND COMPARE TO ENSURE YOU UNDERSTAND THE TERMS AND FEATURES. PRIVATE STUDENT LOANS THAT HAVE VARIABLE RATES CAN GO UP AFTER CONSUMMATION. FEDERAL STUDENT LOANS ARE REQUIRED BY LAW TO PROVIDE A RANGE OF FLEXIBLE REPAYMENT OPTIONS, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, INCOME-BASED REPAYMENT AND INCOME-CONTINGENT REPAYMENT PLANS, AND LOAN FORGIVENESS AND DEFERMENT BENEFITS, WHICH OTHER STUDENT LOANS ARE NOT REQUIRED TO PROVIDE. FEDERAL LOANS GENERALLY HAVE ORIGINATION FEES, BUT ARE AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS REGARDLESS OF INCOME.

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