HELPING BUILD SMART FINANCIAL HABITS

Your student doesn't need to become a financial expert overnight — and neither do you. This guide covers the habits that matter most in the first year: budgeting, spotting the small leaks, building a cushion for the unexpected, and knowing where to turn when money is tight.

Building a Monthly Budget

A budget just means knowing what's coming in and what's going out before the month starts, not after. Encourage your student to add up every source of income (job wages, aid refunds, family support) and list every expense, then compare. If aid arrives as a lump sum, divide it by the number of months it needs to cover and treat it like a paycheck.

Sample Budget: Part-time student	Amount	Notes
Job Wages (after taxes)	+ $900	About 20 hrs/week
Aid Refund	+ $400	$2,400/semester ÷ 6 months
Total Income	**$1,300**	
Rent (split 2 ways)	– $450	Off-campus apartment
Groceries, transportation, phone, subscriptions, personal, books	– $450	Combined variable costs
Total Expenses	**$900**	
Left Over to Save	**$400**	Emergency fund + goals

A common starting point is the 50/30/20 rule: 50% of income to needs, 30% to wants, 20% to savings. Free tools like YNAB (free for students) or a basic spreadsheet work fine — the tool matters less than reviewing it monthly.

Needs vs. Wants — and the Gray Zone

Needs are what your student must have to stay healthy and stay in school. Wants improve comfort or enjoyment but aren't essential. Many things sit in between — a laptop is a need, but the top-of-the-line model is a want. The goal isn't a hard rule; it's building the habit of pausing to ask which one a purchase actually is.

Need	Related want
Rent / housing	Living alone instead of with roommates
Groceries	Eating out, delivery fees, specialty drinks
Required textbooks	New copy vs. used, rented, or library
Reliable transportation	Daily rideshares vs. bus pass + walking

A useful household rule: wait 24 hours on any unplanned purchase over $20. Most urges pass on their own.

How Small Purchases Add Up

Nobody goes broke on one coffee. But small, repeated purchases are invisible until someone adds them up — and the total is usually higher than expected.

Purchase	Frequency	Annual cost
$5 coffee	5x/week	$1,300
$12 lunch out	3x/week	$1,872
$8 delivery fee + tip	2x/week	$832
Combined total (incl. snacks & streaming)	—	**$6,111/yr ≈ 500+ hrs of work at $12/hr**

This isn't an argument against ever buying coffee — it's a case for tracking spending for one week. Most students are genuinely surprised by where the leak is.

Emergency Fund & Financial Safety Nets

Financial experts recommend 3–6 months of expenses in savings for adults, but for a college student even a starter fund makes a real difference. Saving $10/week reaches $500 in under a year.

Level	Target	Covers
Starter fund	$500	Small repairs, copays, minor emergencies
Basic fund	$1,000	Most single-event emergencies
Solid fund	$2,000–$3,000	Larger repairs, a month of reduced income

An emergency fund is one safety net — these are others worth knowing about before they're needed:

- Campus emergency aid — many colleges offer one-time grants or short-term loans for students in crisis; ask the financial aid office.
- Campus food pantries — free groceries, open to any student with an ID, no questions asked.
- Student employment office — work-study and on-campus jobs for enrolled students.
- Community programs — SNAP and Medicaid eligibility rules for students have changed in recent years; more students qualify than before.
- Credit as a last resort only — a low-limit card can bridge a true emergency, but the balance should be paid off quickly. Payday loans and cash-advance apps are debt traps, not safety nets.

Building Credit: The Basics

A credit score is a number lenders use to judge how reliably someone repays borrowed money — it affects apartment applications, car loans, and interest rates for years to come. On-time payments build a strong history; missed or late payments can hurt a score for years. Two low-risk ways for a student to start building credit: a secured credit card (a deposit, often around $500, sets the spending limit) or a credit-builder loan through a bank or credit union (payments are reported to credit bureaus before your student ever touches the money).

- AnnualCreditReport.com is the only site authorized by federal law to provide free credit reports — worth pointing your student there rather than a lookalike site that charges a fee or sells a subscription.

College Student Discounts

Discounts aren't income, but they keep money from going out the door unnecessarily. Two free services are worth your student signing up for:

- UniDays (myunidays.com) — free verified-student membership with discounts across tech, fashion, food, and software brands.
- Student Beans (studentbeans.com/us) — verifies student status with a school email and unlocks deals at major retailers.

Resources for You as a Parent

- Campus coaching — most universities have a free, one-on-one Financial Wellness or Money Coaching office. Two Oklahoma examples: OU's MoneyCoach & Student Financial Center, and OSU's Center for Financial Health and Wellness (Spears School of Business).
- FTC Budget Worksheet — a printable income-vs-expenses worksheet to build a first budget together.

- FDIC “How Money Smart Are You?” — playmoneysmart.fdic.gov, 14 free interactive games on earning, spending, saving, and borrowing.
- Consumer.gov — free FTC articles and videos on budgeting, credit, debt, and scam prevention.
- CFPB “Money as You Grow” — consumerfinance.gov/consumer-tools/money-as-you-grow, free conversation starters and activities for parents and caregivers, spanning ages 3–21.
- MyMoney.gov — the federal government's financial-education hub, coordinated across 24 federal agencies.
- FDIC Money Smart for Young Adults (ages 16–24) — fdic.gov/consumer-resource-center/money-smart-young-adults, a free curriculum built for this exact life stage; participant guides are downloadable even outside a classroom setting.
- Most Oklahoma campuses also run a food pantry open to any student with a valid ID — ask your student's financial aid office, or search “[your college] food pantry.”