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Lynn Radlauer Lubell knows about getting a child through college on a budget. And the [Boca Raton](#) mom and South Florida college entrance interviewer for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology wants to help other parents pull it off.

That's the goal behind InLikeMe.com, the Web site launched by Lubell six months ago. It's a self-help portal that offers free advice, guidance and resources for college-bound students (and their parents)

who are applying for college and figuring how to pay for it.

Getting a child through college on a tight budget has never been easy, but perhaps never tougher than today. As an example of the worsening times, state officials recently said Florida parents will no longer be able to count on the cost savings as they did in the past from the Bright Futures scholarship program, which was set up to pay up to 100 percent of tuition fees at state public universities for students with great grades. Fortunately, Lubell says opportunities for financial assistance — merit aid, scholarships, loans, grants, work-study programs — abound right now. "Because of the bad times, many universities are offering generous financial aid packages to attract students and their parents," she said.

And as the economy has soured, Lubell realized many parents and students "have become more focused on finding educational values."

Lubell is a graduate of MIT and has an MBA from Harvard Business School. As a member of the MIT Educational Council, she has interviewed nearly 200 MIT applicants from Broward and Palm Beach counties and coached many families through the admissions process in the past 10 years. She developed InLikeMe.com in response to people asking her for advice, suggestions and resources to help them search for colleges and develop strategies to get accepted.

Lubell's first rule of thumb: Before you cross a college off your wish list due to "sticker shock," understand that the real cost of college is the "net price" (list price minus the amount of financial aid) which may make the situation look a lot less dire. The trick, she says, is to focus on finding the best college for the best deal.

Here are some tips from InLikeMe.com.

Turbo charge your academic record. A rigorous class schedule shows intellectual curiosity, a willingness to challenge yourself and that you are comfortable with hard work. There are financial benefits too. A strong academic record can lead to merit scholarships and credits earned from dual enrollment, AP, and IB classes and CLEP exams can cut college costs. Completing college in three years instead four can be a 25 percent savings.

Take advantage of free and low-cost software for SAT/ ACT scores. Strong scores improve chances of acceptance and may lead to significant scholarship money. And there are plenty of Web sites that offer free prep tools and guidance: Check out PinkMonkey.com, Number2.com, PrepHub.com, FreeSAT1Prep.com, FreeRice.com, INeedaPencil.com and Google's Adaptive SAT Practice Gadget to help you boost your scores.

Visit college via the Web. Hold off booking a flight and start researching colleges online. In addition to school web portals such as usf.edu for the University of South Florida or www.fau.edu for Florida Atlantic University, many sites offer anything from online tours to rankings.

Be desirable. While applications (and rejections) are up at many colleges, admissions officers are paying closer attention to yield — the percentage of students offered admission who decide to attend.

Given similar qualifications, applicants who appear likely to attend usually have a better chance. Some colleges even track online visits. It's smart to register on a college's Web site and when you visit a school, communicate with admissions officers and participate in blogs and Web forums.

Don't rule out private colleges. In some cases they can be less expensive than state universities. With merit aid, Lubell said, a student could win a full scholarship to the University of Miami, for example, which could cost less than attending the University of Florida in Gainesville. And even without merit aid, states schools such as the University of Michigan for out-of-state students cost more than many private colleges. Some top schools, especially those with big endowments such as MIT and Harvard, have generous aid programs and waive tuition for families below certain income levels.

Negotiate with financial aid officers. Financial aid packages can sometimes be reworked. Consider contacting financial aid officers directly if your situation has changed or if you've received a more attractive package from another school of similar or higher caliber.

Daniel Vasquez can be reached at dvasquez@sunsentinel.com, or 954-356-4219, or 561-243- 6600, extension 4219. For more columns from Daniel Vasquez, see SunSentinel.com/vasquez.

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