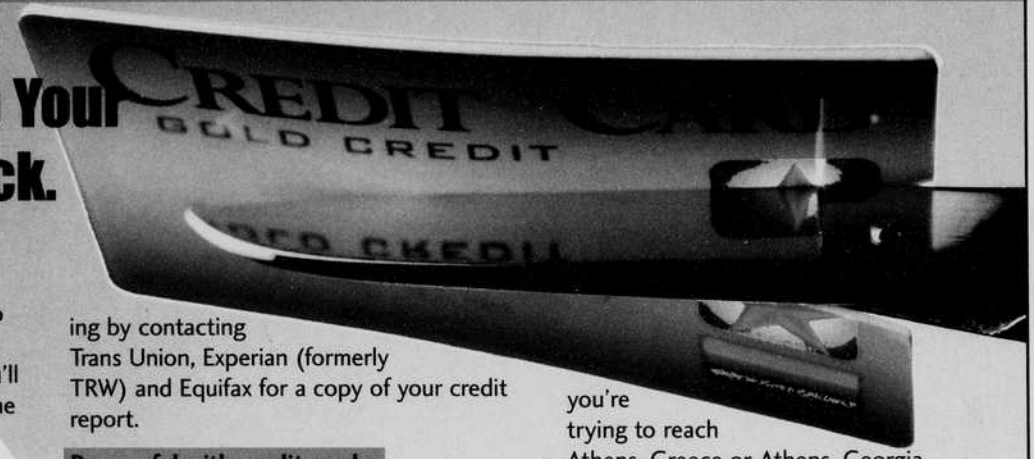
Get on the Right Track

5 Tips to Keep Your Spending in Check.

By January Gill



No matter how much (or how little) money you have, it's never too early to start tracking your finances. If you create financial goals and stick to them now, you'll have an easier time managing money in the future. Keep these five things in mind:

Set up a budget.

Take a few minutes to write down monthly income (student loan refund, money from parents), and the monthly necessities and expenses that it must cover. If your cash flow is on the plus side, consider saving that money to create an emergency fund. If your expenses are greater than your income, or if you have a shortfall, take a second look to see how you might cut back on your everyday expenditures. Do you really need that daily $3 coffee from Starbucks, or could you use an extra $240 a semester?

Pay bills on time.

Now is the time to get into the habit of paying bills on time or before their due date. Creditors tend to look unfavorably on late payments, which will affect your bank credit rating. A bad or even questionable rating will make it difficult to purchase a car or rent an apartment. At the very least, a string of delinquent payments can result in late fees, penalties and higher interest rates on your credit cards. Check your credit rating by contacting Trans Union, Experian (formerly TRW) and Equifax for a copy of your credit report.

Be careful with credit cards.

If you don't have a card, don't bother. Not yet. If you do, spend wisely. Avoid paying for disposable items on your cards. Weekly purchases such as groceries, gasoline, CDs and other small ticket items should be paid for with cash, unless you pay your bill early. Who wants to pay for Fiona Apple tickets eight months after the concert? Also, if you have extra money at the end of the month, pay more than the minimum amount. Cutting down on the balance will help you lower the monthly interest due.

Save! Save! Save!

Are you trying to save money for a semester abroad in Europe, or to buy your first car? The best way to reach your goal is to pay yourself first. Make this your mantra. Put cash aside in a savings account or money market account. No amount is too great or too small, especially when your small amount grows with compound interest. That $3 you saved from skipping your morning Starbucks coffee will add up to a hefty sum in a few years. Whether you're trying to reach Athens, Greece or Athens, Georgia, **Quicken.com** has a basic savings calculator to help you figure out your short- and long-term goals.

Stay on track!

Saving for the future is tough, much tougher than creating a budget and setting financial goals. It's up to you to make sure you stay on track. If you're looking for online resources to help you stay focused, check out **TheWhiz.com**, **Greenmagazine.com** and the Armchair Millionaire for information on savings, spending, investing and more. Remember, if you can get through a semester of calculus and trig, your finances should be a breeze! •

For more tips about saving money, go to Steamtunnels.net and search for "save."

Leaving Poor—Top ten colleges that leave graduates with the most debt.

School name	% of grads with debt	Average amount of debt
Loyola University-Chicago	85%	$24,125
Nova Southeastern University	65%	$23,498
Clarkson	85%	$22,670
University of San Diego	47%	$22,600
Florida Institute of Technology	55%	$22,479
Pepperdine	60%	$21,669
Massachusetts Inst. of Technology	70%	$21,617
Georgia State University	54%	$21,535
University of Vermont	47%	$21,000
Case Western Reserve	63%	$20,595

Source: U. S. News & World Report

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Trans Union
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Experian
experian.com

Equifax
equifax.com

Quicken
quicken.com

Quicken's savings calculator
quicken.com/QuickAnswers/?calc=vcsave

TheWhiz
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