

Take 529 plan distributions with confidence

529 plans offer both flexibility and control to account owners. Benefits include generous contribution limits, tax-deferred growth and generally tax-free distributions to fund a wide array of qualified education expenses.

Once you've entered the distribution phase of 529 ownership, it's important to understand the mechanics and potential implications of taking distributions from your account. These five tips may help you avoid unintended tax consequences.

1. Many education expenses can be funded tax- and penalty-free – but not all.

Perhaps the best feature of 529 plan accounts is the ability to use earnings tax-free to pay for qualified education expenses (QEE), including:

- Tuition and required fees
- Books and required equipment
- Computers (including required software and access to the internet primarily used by the student)
- Room and board (at least half-time student status required)
- Additional expenses for a special-needs beneficiary incurred in connection with enrollment or attendance
- \$10,000 of tuition toward public, private and religious elementary and secondary education on a per year, per beneficiary basis¹
- Up to \$10,000 to repay principal or interest on qualified student loans per student (only for beneficiary and/or siblings)²

Almost all accredited U.S. two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities and many vocational and technical schools are considered qualified institutions. Off-campus housing may also be deemed qualified in an amount not to exceed the cost of living on campus in a dormitory, provided the institution offers student housing.

There is no cap on the amount of qualified distributions that can be taken from a 529 plan each year for college expenses.

Some expenses are not considered QEE, including:

- Student fees that are not required (e.g., insurance,

activity or intramural fees, etc.)

- Transportation costs
- Out-of-pocket expenses used to claim the American Opportunities Tax Credit or Lifetime Learning credit³

Any use of 529 plan assets for nonqualified expenses results in taxation of the distributed earnings, as well as a 10% federal penalty assessed on those same earnings. However, the 10% federal penalty is waived for the following criteria:

- Death of the beneficiary
- Disability of the beneficiary
- Distributions in the amount of scholarships received for the beneficiary
- The qualified education expenses were used to generate the American Opportunity Tax Credit or the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit.
- Attendance at any of the U.S. military academies⁴

2. Scholarships allow you to take nonqualified withdrawals penalty-free.

If a 529 account beneficiary receives a scholarship, the 10% federal penalty that would otherwise apply to earnings of nonqualified distributions from the account is waived to the extent of the scholarship amount. Most scholarships are awarded as annual awards, renewable for a certain number of years. For example, a scholarship may be awarded as \$10,000 annually, renewable for four years.

In this example, the total amount of the scholarship received is \$40,000, and that amount could be withdrawn from the 529 plan for nonqualified expenses penalty-free; however, earnings would still be subject to tax at ordinary income rates of the distribution recipient. Check with your tax professional to see if it's necessary to take a \$10,000 distribution each year to waive the penalty or if you can take a lump sum.

¹ Special rules apply. Discuss with your qualified tax professional.

² In the aggregate, over the course of an individual's lifetime.

³ Total QEE are reduced by any expenses used claiming these credits.

⁴ Only applies to the extent the amount of the distribution doesn't exceed cost of attendance.

3. You may receive Form 1099-Q,⁵ but that doesn't always mean you owe taxes.

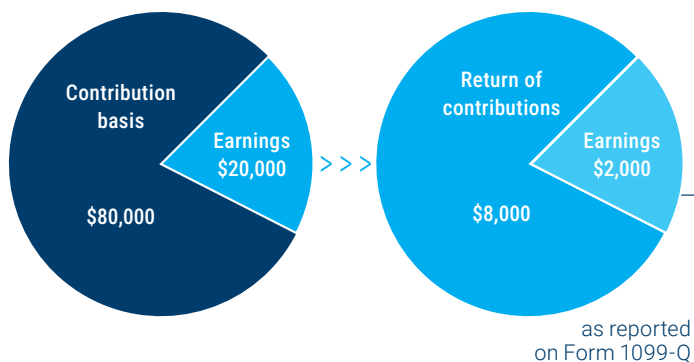
All distributions from a 529 plan, whether qualified or not, result in the generation of a Form 1099-Q. Form 1099-Q is sent to the beneficiary or account owner; whomever is considered the recipient for the distribution must be included on the recipient's tax return for the year received. Distributions from 529 plans can be made to the:

- Education institution
- Designated beneficiary
- Account owner

For distributions made payable directly to the institution or beneficiary, the beneficiary receives Form 1099-Q and it is reported under their Social Security number. Account owners receive Form 1099-Q for distributions made payable to themselves.

All 529 plan withdrawals are pro-rata, meaning that the earnings are distributed in proportion to the overall breakdown of contributions and earnings in the account at the time of the distribution. Consider this hypothetical example:

Account total balance: \$100,000 Resulting pro-rata distribution of \$10,000



The earnings portion of any distribution is withdrawn tax-free for qualified expenses but is subject to tax at the recipient's ordinary income rate and a potential 10% federal penalty if used for nonqualified expenses. So, it's up to the distribution recipient and their tax professional to determine:

- Is the withdrawal a qualified distribution as defined by Section 529 of the Internal Revenue Code?
- If not, is there an applicable penalty waiver?

The earnings portion of any nonqualified distribution is subject to tax at the recipient's ordinary income rate.

4. Be careful how much you withdraw in anticipation of future expenses.

Qualified distributions from 529 plans should be taken in the same taxable year the associated expense was incurred. Additionally, a withdrawal of funds can be considered a qualified distribution if it is used to pay for expenses that may be incurred within the first three months of the subsequent year. For example, you may choose to take a distribution in December for a tuition bill that you know will be arriving in January of the following year. However, there's no requirement that distributions be taken prior or in direct relation to specific expenses. So account owners can easily reimburse themselves for expenses paid throughout the year with one distribution.

Account owners should be mindful, however, not to withdraw too much money in anticipation of expenses that do not materialize, as these excess withdrawals are not eligible for recontribution to the same beneficiary's 529 plan account within 60 days unless they're refunded directly from the qualified educational institution. It's important for the participant to keep accurate records of expenditures in the event of an audit.

If the account owner takes a distribution more than the amount needed to offset qualified expenses, there is a potential work-around to prevent the excess amount being treated as a nonqualified distribution. If the account owner acts within 60 days, the unneeded funds could be recontributed to a different 529 plan as an indirect rollover for the same beneficiary or another beneficiary who is a family member of the original beneficiary — as long as a rollover for the same beneficiary has not occurred within the previous 12 months.

5. 529A accounts offer opportunities for individuals with disabilities and their families.

With the passage of the Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act in 2014 and the birth of 529A accounts, individuals with disabilities can now take advantage of 529 and 529A account saving strategies.

529A accounts, also known as ABLE accounts, can be established for any disabled individual with an age of onset of less than 26 years old. ABLE accounts can be used tax-free to pay for any disability-related expenses. However, ABLE accounts can only be funded up to \$19,000 per year in aggregate contributions.⁶

⁵ Payments from qualified education programs.

⁶ In 2025.

Rollovers are one way to take full advantage of ABLE accounts.⁷ The Internal Revenue Code allows one tax-free rollover of assets within 60 days from a 529 account to a 529A account for the same beneficiary or a member of the family of the beneficiary per 12-month period.⁸ Account owners who have funded a 529 account can roll up to \$19,000 per year into an ABLE account to be used tax-free for any of these expenses:

- Education
- Transportation
- Assistive technology
- Preventative care
- Legal fees
- Funeral and burial expenses
- Housing
- Employment training and support
- Personal support services
- Financial services
- Oversight and monitoring
- Other expenses approved by the IRS

6. SECURE 2.0 brings long awaited rollover to Roth IRA provision.

With the passage of the SECURE 2.0 Act of 2022, a provision that allows for “leftover” funds from a 529 account to be rolled into a Roth IRA brings an entirely new opportunity for tax-free distributions. Prior to this legislation, the only opportunity for tax-free distributions from 529 accounts was for qualified education expenses; however, starting on January 1, 2024, rollover to a Roth IRA is now available subject to certain conditions:

- The 529 account must have been maintained for a minimum of 15 years
- Contributions to the 529 account within the last five years are ineligible
- Eligible rollover amount is subject to the annual Roth IRA contribution limit (currently \$7,000 for 2025 for ages 50 and under, \$8,000 for 50+). Income limits do not apply, however there must still be earned income.
- Lifetime aggregate limit of \$35,000 per individual
- Rollover must be to a Roth IRA owned by the designated beneficiary and must be a direct trustee-to-trustee transfer

The bottom line

There’s a lot of education on how to fund 529 plan accounts – how much to invest, gifting limits, etc. But knowing how and when to take 529 plan distributions can be just as important to participants. And understanding the mechanics and options can make for an easier experience with potentially better tax treatment. Few financial vehicles provide account owners with as much flexibility and control as 529 plans, and fortunately those benefits extend to distributions.

⁷ Rollovers from 529 accounts to 529A accounts may affect eligibility for government benefits and have other tax consequences. Speak to your tax advisor to determine whether a rollover makes sense for your situation.

⁸ The rollover provision is set to expire on January 1, 2026 unless Congress acts to extend or make the provision permanent.

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Investing involves risk including the risk of loss of principal.

Withdrawal of earnings not used for qualified education expenses will be subject to federal and possibly state and local income tax and may be subject to an additional 10% penalty.

* Source: Columbia Threadneedle as of March 31, 2025.

Source of all data unless specified otherwise: Columbia Threadneedle as of March 31, 2025.

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CT-FSA/115353 G (06/25) PXC/CTNA7957056.1