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We hope you find our 3rd quarter newsletter informative. Included are some of our favorite topics such as financial independence, charitable giving strategies, and tax planning. We would welcome the opportunity to explore these topics with you. Financial planning starts with determining your short and long-term goals and working with us to create a plan to help you achieve them.

As always, our team of advisors are here to help:

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## Is It Time to Declare Your Financial Independence?



No matter how much money you have or which life stage you're in, becoming financially independent starts with a dream. Your dream might be to finally pay off the mountain of debt you've accumulated, or to stop relying on someone else for financial support. Or perhaps your dream is to retire early so you can spend more time with your family, travel the world, or open your own business. Financial independence, however you define it, is freedom from the financial obstacles that are keeping you from living life on your own terms.

### Envision the future

If you were to become financially independent, what would change? Would you spend your time differently? Live in another place? What would you own? Would you work part-time? Ultimately, you want to define how you choose to live your life. It's your dream, so there's no wrong answer.

### Work at it

Unless you're already wealthy, you may have had moments when winning the lottery seemed like the only way to become financially secure. But your path to financial independence isn't likely to start at your local convenience store's lottery counter.

Though there are many ways to become financially independent, most of them require hard work. And retaining wealth isn't necessarily easy, because wealth may not last if spending isn't kept in check. As income rises, lifestyle inflation is a real concern. Becoming — and remaining — financially independent requires diligently balancing earning, spending, and saving.

### Earn more, spend wisely, and save aggressively

**Earn more.** The bigger the gap between your income and expenses, the quicker it will be to become financially independent, no matter what your goal is. The more you can earn, the more you can potentially save. This might mean

finding a job with a higher salary, working an extra job, or working part-time in retirement. And a job is just one source of income. If you're resourceful and able to put in extra hours, you may also be able to generate regular income in other ways — for example, renting out a garage apartment or starting a side business.

**Spend wisely.** Look for opportunities to reduce your spending without affecting your quality of life. For the biggest impact, focus on reducing your largest expenses — for example, housing, food, and transportation. Practicing mindful spending can also help you free up more money to save. Before you buy something nonessential, think about how important it is to you and what value it brings to your life so that you don't end up with a garage or attic filled with regrettable purchases.

**Save aggressively.** Set a wealth accumulation goal and then prioritize saving. Of course, if you have a substantial amount of debt, saving may be somewhat curtailed until that debt is paid off. Take simple steps such as choosing investments that match your goals and time frame, and paying yourself first by automatically investing as much as possible in a retirement savings plan. Time is an important ally in the quest for financial independence, so start saving as early as possible and build your nest egg over time. (Note that all investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal, and there is no guarantee that any investment strategy will be successful.)

### Keep going

**Make adjustments.** Life changes. Unexpected bills come up. Some years will be tougher financially than others. Expect to make some adjustments to your plan along the way, especially if you have a long-term time frame, but keep going.

**Track your progress.** Celebrate both small milestones and big victories. Seeing the progress you're making will help you stay motivated as you pursue your dream of financial independence.



**Some of the recent changes to the standard deduction and itemized deductions may affect your ability to obtain an income tax benefit from your charitable contributions. Incorporating charitable giving into your year-end tax planning may be even more important now. If you are age 70½ or older and have a traditional IRA, you may wish to consider a qualified charitable distribution.**

## Charitable Giving After Tax Reform

Tax reform changes to the standard deduction and itemized deductions may affect your ability to obtain an income tax benefit from charitable giving. Projecting how you'll be affected by these changes while there's still time to take action is important.

### Income tax benefit of charitable giving

If you itemize deductions on your federal income tax return, you can generally deduct your gifts to qualified charities. However, many itemized deductions have been eliminated or restricted, and the standard deduction has substantially increased. You can generally choose to take the standard deduction or to itemize deductions. As a result of the changes, far fewer taxpayers will be able to reduce their taxes by itemizing deductions.

Taxpayers whose total itemized deductions other than charitable contributions would be less than the standard deduction (including adjustments for being blind or age 65 or older) effectively have less of a tax savings incentive to make charitable gifts. For example, assume that a married couple, both age 65, have total itemized deductions (other than charitable contributions) of \$15,000. They would have a standard deduction of \$27,000 in 2019. The couple would effectively receive no tax savings for the first \$12,000 of charitable contributions they make. Even with a \$12,000 charitable deduction, total itemized deductions of \$27,000 would not exceed their standard deduction.

Taxpayers whose total itemized deductions other than charitable contributions equal or exceed the standard deduction (including adjustments for being blind or age 65 or older) generally receive a tax benefit from charitable contributions equal to the income taxes saved. For example, assume that a married couple, both age 65, have total itemized deductions (other than charitable contributions) of \$30,000. They would be entitled to a standard deduction of \$27,000 in 2019. If they are in the 24% income tax bracket and make a charitable contribution of \$10,000, they would reduce their income taxes by \$2,400 (\$10,000 charitable deduction x 24% tax rate).

However, the amount of your income tax charitable deduction may be limited to certain percentages of your adjusted gross income (AGI). For example, your deduction for gifts of cash to public charities is generally limited to 60% of your AGI for the year, and other gifts to charity are typically limited to 30% or 20% of your AGI. Charitable deductions that exceed the AGI limits may generally be carried over and deducted over the next five years, subject to the income percentage limits in those years.

### Year-end tax planning

When making charitable gifts during the year, you should consider them as part of your year-end tax planning. Typically, you have a certain amount of control over the timing of income and expenses. You generally want to time your recognition of income so that it will be taxed at the lowest rate possible, and to time your deductible expenses so they can be claimed in years when you are in a higher tax bracket.

For example, if you expect that you will be in a higher tax bracket next year, it may make sense to wait and make the charitable contribution in January so you can take the deduction next year when the deduction results in a greater tax benefit. Or you might shift the charitable contribution, along with other itemized deductions, into a year when your itemized deductions would be greater than the standard deduction amount. And if the income percentage limits above are a concern in one year, you might consider ways to shift income into that year or shift deductions out of that year, so that a larger charitable deduction is available for that year. A tax professional can help you evaluate your individual tax situation.

### Qualified charitable distribution (QCD)

If you are age 70½ or older, you can make tax-free charitable donations directly from your IRAs (other than SEP and SIMPLE IRAs) to a qualified charity. The distribution must be one that would otherwise be taxable to you. You can exclude up to \$100,000 of these QCDs from your gross income each year. And if you file a joint return, your spouse (if 70½ or older) can exclude an additional \$100,000 of QCDs.

You cannot deduct QCDs as a charitable contribution because the QCD is excluded from your gross income. In order to get a tax benefit from your charitable contribution without this special rule, you would have to itemize deductions, and your charitable deduction could be limited by the percentage of AGI limitations. QCDs may allow you to claim the standard deduction and exclude the QCD from income.

QCDs count toward satisfying any required minimum distributions (RMDs) that you would otherwise have to receive from your IRA, just as if you had received an actual distribution from the plan.

**Caution:** Your QCD cannot be made to a private foundation, donor-advised fund, or supporting organization. Further, the gift cannot be made in exchange for a charitable gift annuity or to a charitable remainder trust.



## Financial Advice for Recent College Graduates

You've put in the hard work as a college student and finally received your diploma. Now you're ready to head out on your own. And though you may not have given much thought to your financial future when you were in college, you have new financial challenges and goals to consider. Fortunately, there are some simple steps you can take to start on the right track with your personal finances.

### Set financial goals

Setting goals is an important part of life, especially when it comes to your finances. And though your financial goals will likely change over time, you can always make adjustments in the future. Start out by asking yourself some basic questions about your financial goals, such as whether they are short term (e.g., saving money to buy a car or rent an apartment) or long term (e.g., paying off student loans or buying your own home). Next, ask yourself how important it is to accomplish each goal and determine how much you would need to save for each goal.

### Understand the importance of having a budget

A budget is an important part of managing your finances. Knowing exactly how you are spending your money each month can set you on a path to pursue your financial goals. Start by listing your current monthly income. Next, add up all of your expenses. It may help to divide expenses into two categories: fixed (e.g., housing, food, transportation, student loan payments) and discretionary (e.g., entertainment, vacations). Ideally, you should be spending less than you earn. If not, you need to review your expenses and look for ways to cut down on your spending.

Remember that the most important part of budgeting is sticking to it, so you should monitor your budget regularly and make changes as needed. To help stay on track, try to make budgeting a part of your daily routine and be sure to give yourself an occasional reward (e.g., dinner at a restaurant instead of cooking at home).

### Establish an emergency fund

An emergency fund is money set aside to protect yourself in the event of an unexpected financial crisis, such as a job loss or medical bills. Typically, you will want to have at least three to six months' worth of living expenses in your cash reserve. Of course, the amount you should save depends on your individual circumstances (e.g., job stability, health status).

A good way to establish an emergency fund is to earmark a portion of your paycheck each pay period to help achieve your goal.

### Manage your debt situation properly

Whether it's debt from student loans or credit cards, you'll want to avoid the pitfalls that sometimes accompany borrowing. To manage your debt situation properly, keep track of your loan balances and interest rates and develop a plan to manage your payments and avoid late fees. If you need help paying off your student loans, consider the following tips:

- Find out if your employer offers some type of student debt assistance
- Contact your lender about your repayment options
- Consider whether loan consolidation or refinancing is available

### Maintain good credit

Having good credit will impact so many different aspects of your financial situation, from obtaining a loan to gaining employment. You can establish and maintain a good credit history by avoiding late payments on existing loans and paying down any debt you may have. In addition, you should monitor your credit report on a regular basis for possible errors or signs of fraud/identity theft.

### Determine your insurance needs

Insurance might not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think about your finances. However, having the right amount of insurance is an important part of any financial strategy. Your specific insurance needs will depend on your circumstances. For example, if you rent an apartment, you'll need renters insurance to protect yourself against loss or damage to your personal property. If you own a car, you should have appropriate coverage for that as well. You may also want to evaluate your need for other types of insurance, such as disability and life.

As for health insurance, you have a couple of options. You can usually stay on your parents' insurance until you turn 26. In addition, you may have access to health insurance through your employer or a government-sponsored health plan, or you can purchase your own plan through the federal or state-based Health Insurance Marketplace. For more information, visit [healthcare.gov](http://healthcare.gov).

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## Do I need to pay estimated tax?

Taxpayers are required to pay most of their tax obligation during the year by having tax withheld from their paychecks or pension payments, or by making estimated tax payments. Estimated tax is the primary method used to pay tax on income that isn't subject to withholding. This typically includes income from self-employment, interest, dividends, and gain from the sale of assets. Estimated tax is used to pay both income tax and self-employment tax, as well as other taxes reported on your income tax return.

Generally, you must pay federal estimated tax for the current year if: (1) you expect to owe at least \$1,000 in tax for the current year, and (2) you expect your tax withholding and refundable tax credits to be less than the smaller of (a) 90% of the tax on your tax return for the current year, or (b) 100% of the tax on your tax return for the previous year (your tax return for the previous year must cover 12 months).

There are special rules for farmers, fishermen, and certain high-income taxpayers. If at least two-thirds of your gross income is from farming or fishing, you can substitute 66-2/3% for 90% in general rule (2)(a) above. If your adjusted

gross income for the previous year was more than \$150,000 (\$75,000 if you were married and filed a separate return for that year), you must substitute 110% for 100% in general rule (2)(b) above.

If all of your income is subject to withholding, you probably don't need to pay estimated tax. If you have taxes withheld by an employer, you may be able to avoid having to make estimated tax payments, even on your nonwage income, by increasing the amount withheld from your paycheck.

You can use Form 1040-ES and its worksheets to figure your estimated tax. They can help you determine the amount you should pay for the year through withholding and estimated tax payments to avoid paying a penalty. The year is divided into four payment periods. After you have determined your total estimated tax for the year, you then determine how much you should pay by the due date of each payment period to avoid a penalty for that period. If you don't pay enough during any payment period, you may owe a penalty even if you are due a refund when you file your tax return.

Withholding and estimated tax payments may also be required for state and local taxes.



## Have you checked your tax withholding lately?

If you were unpleasantly surprised by the amount of tax you owed or the amount of your tax refund when you filed your 2018 tax return, it may be time to check your withholding.

It may also be time if there are changes in your life or financial situation that affect your tax liability. For example, have you recently married, divorced, had a child, purchased a new home, changed jobs, or had a change in the amount of your taxable income not subject to withholding (e.g., capital gains)?

You can generally change the amount of federal tax you have withheld from your paycheck by giving a new Form W-4 to your employer. You can use a number of worksheets for the Form W-4 or the IRS Withholding Calculator (available at [irs.gov](http://irs.gov)) to help you plan your tax withholding strategy.

If changes reduce the number of allowances you are permitted to claim or your marital status changes from married to single, you must give your employer a new Form W-4 within 10 days. You can generally submit a new Form W-4 whenever you wish to change your withholding allowances for any other reason.

In general, you can claim various withholding allowances on the Form W-4 based on your tax filing status and the tax credits, itemized deductions (or any additional standard deduction for age or blindness), and adjustments to income that you expect to claim. You might increase the tax withheld or claim fewer allowances if you have a large amount of nonwage income. (If you have a significant amount of nonwage income, you might also consider making estimated tax payments using IRS Form 1040-ES.) The amount withheld can also be adjusted to reflect that you have more than one job at a time and whether you and your spouse both work. You might reduce the amount of tax withheld by increasing the amount of allowances you claim (to the extent permissible) on the Form W-4.

You can claim exemption from withholding for the current year if: (1) for the prior year, you were entitled to a refund of all federal income tax withheld because you had no tax liability; and (2) for the current year, you expect a refund of all federal income tax withheld because you expect to have no tax liability.