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# STUDENT LOAN REFINANCE: THE SMART BORROWER'S GUIDE

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What every borrower needs to know about reducing student loan interest rates and conquering student loan debt.



# NEW SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENT LOAN BORROWERS



Got student loans? You're certainly not alone. Outstanding student loan debt has exploded over the past decade, climbing to more than \$1.2 trillion\* and becoming the largest consumer liability after mortgages. With the average amount of student loan debt for undergrads now over \$33,000\*\* and closer to the six-figure range for professional and graduate student loans, more people than ever are looking for solutions to help them deal with debt.

Fortunately, as the student loan market has grown, new options have come online to address borrower needs – in particular, student loan refinancing. Similar to the mortgage version, refinancing student loans at a lower interest rate can potentially allow you to:

- **Save money on total interest**
- **Make lower monthly payments**
- **Shorten loan term**
- **Switch from a fixed rate loan to a variable rate loan, or vice versa**
- **Simplify your monthly bill through consolidation**

As great as those benefits sound, many eligible borrowers don't even know that refinancing student loans is an option. And if you have heard of it, you probably have questions about which loans are eligible, how refinancing differs from student loan consolidation, what the qualification criteria is, etc. You may even be concerned that it's going to be a lot of (paper)work for a negligible payoff.

As the largest provider of student loan refinancing, marketplace lender SoFi has extensive experience helping borrowers navigate the refinance landscape. We've put this guide together to answer the most common questions, dispel frequently-heard myths and walk you through the student loan refinance process.

## Ready to get saving? Let's get started.

\*Federal Reserve Bank of New York  
\*\*National Center for Education Statistics

# STUDENT LOAN INTEREST RATES MATTER

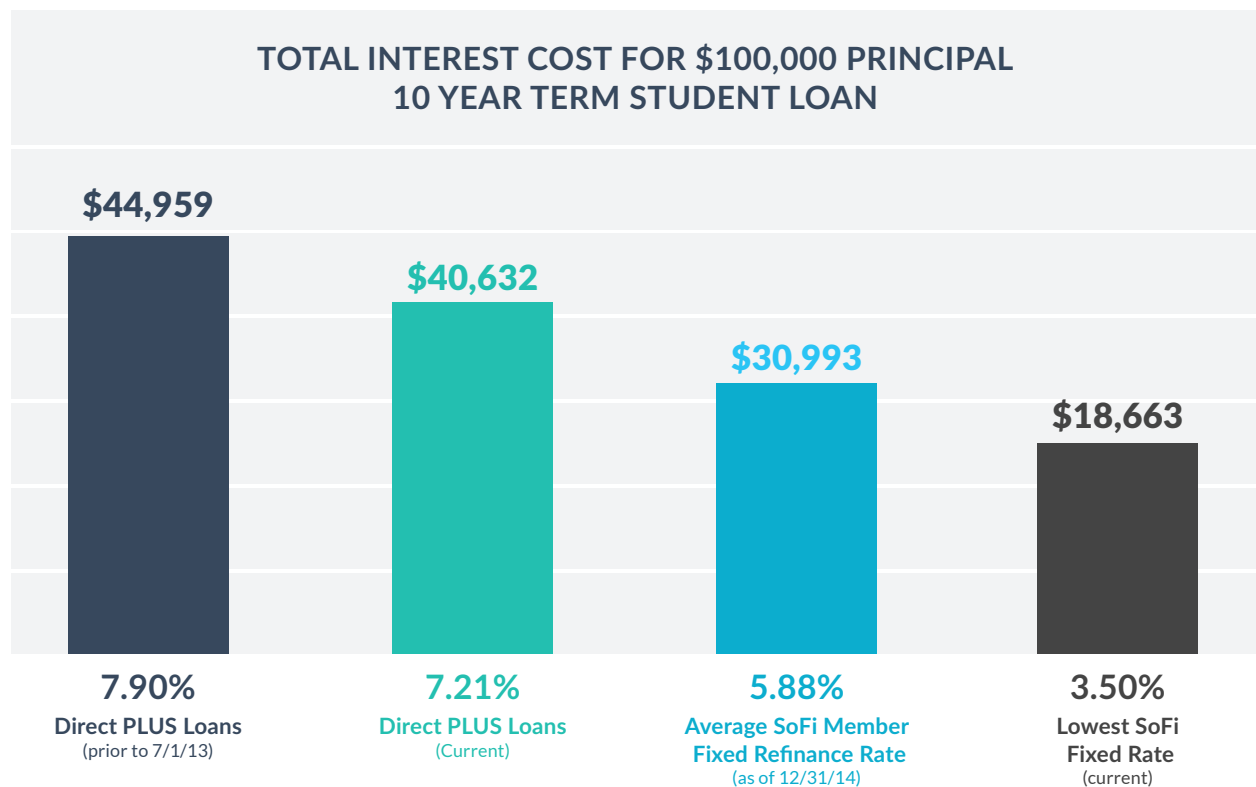
## or, How much can I really save by refinancing?

If you've borrowed money to invest in your education, you know that paying interest on that student loan debt is simply part of the deal. But while "interest" can seem like an abstract notion when you first take out loans, over time it becomes a force to be reckoned with – particularly for those with professional and graduate student loans including MBA, law and medical school graduates, who often have six figures worth of student loan debt to repay.

For example, a borrower with \$100,000 in student loan principal at a 6.8% weighted average interest rate and a 10-year term will pay about \$38,000 in interest over the life of the loan - and that's if they make every payment on time. You can probably think of a thousand other things you'd rather spend \$40K on than loan interest.

So how much money can refinancing student loans really save you? The answer depends on a variety of factors like the amount of debt refinanced, the loan term and the difference between your old and new student loan interest rates. But in general – particularly for high loan balances - even a small reduction in interest rate can translate to significant savings. If the above-mentioned borrower refinanced and cut the interest rate on that \$100K loan by just one percentage point (to 5.8%) and kept the same 10-year term, they would pay about \$32,000 in interest instead – saving about \$6K.

Not bad for a few minutes spent on an [easy online application](#) (more on that later).



Sources: SoFi, US Department of Education as of 12/31/14

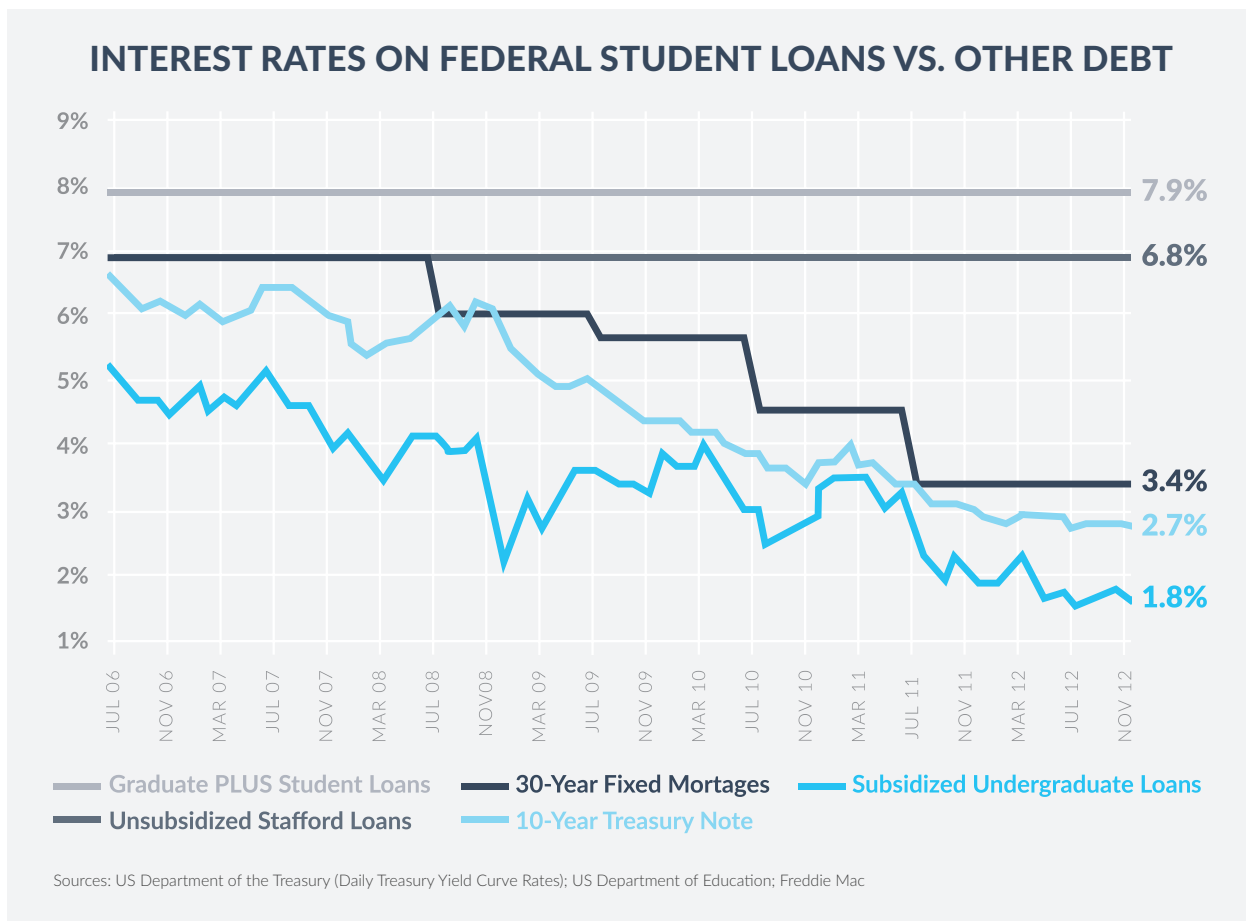


# STUDENT LOAN MYTH ALERT:

Federal student loans always offer the lowest interest rates.

There's often a perception that federal student loans offer the lowest student loan interest rates out there, but when it comes to borrowing for professional or graduate school, that isn't always the case. Most graduate borrowers use a combination of federal Direct unsubsidized loans at 6.21% and Direct PLUS loans at 7.21% to pay for degree programs (PLUS loan borrowers pay a hefty 4.292% origination fee, as well). In today's low interest rate environment, it can be possible to get a much better rate through refinancing with a private lender.

In fact, before the Student Loan Certainty Act was passed in 2013, unsubsidized and PLUS loan rates had remained flat at 6.8% and 7.9%, respectively, for seven years. Meanwhile, prevailing interest rates dropped to rock bottom (see below).



Since this time period coincided with a lot of borrowers reacting to a poor job market by going back to school, it's a big reason why a large percentage of today's outstanding graduate student loan debt is made up of relatively high interest rate federal loans – and why refinancing has become such a sought-after solution.

# CONSOLIDATION VS. REFINANCING

## or, Why wouldn't I just consolidate my loans instead?

One of the most frequently-asked questions we hear is about the difference between student loan consolidation and student loan refinancing. And it's a really good question, because the answer is actually a bit more complex than you'd think.

As its name suggests, consolidating just means combining multiple student loans into one loan. However, the term can have different implications depending on the context in which it's being used. Here's a quick breakdown:

**DIRECT LOAN CONSOLIDATION** is a program offered by the government, and it only applies to federal student loans. The interest rate on your new, consolidated loan is a weighted average of your original loans' rates.

**A PRIVATE CONSOLIDATION LOAN** is offered by a private lender. It's a confusing term, because when you "consolidate" loans with a private lender, they are actually giving you a new interest rate for your combined loans based on your creditworthiness. So in effect, when you consolidate student loans with a private lender, you are also refinancing those loans.

Now that we've got that straight, let's compare the Direct Loan Consolidation program with refinancing and consolidating student loans through a private lender.



### Direct Loan Consolidation

A government program that allows you to combine multiple federal education loans into a single loan.

The resulting interest rate is a weighted average of your original loans' rates.

If your monthly payment decreases, it's likely the result of lengthening the term, which can mean paying more interest over time.



### Student Loan Refinancing

When a private lender consolidates your loans, what they are really doing is refinancing your loans.

Through private loan consolidation, you will receive a new (ideally lower) interest rate based on your current financial picture.

Most private lenders will only consolidate and refinance private loans, but SoFi accepts both private and federal loans.

## NEED MORE INFO?

Here's a quick rundown of the differences between Direct Loan Consolidation and student loan refinancing.

	DIRECT LOAN CONSOLIDATION	STUDENT LOAN REFINANCING
Are federal loans eligible?	✓	✓
Are private loans eligible?	✗	✓
Is a credit check required?	✗	✓
Can I lower my interest rate?	✗	✓
Will I save money?	✗	✓
Will I get one bill?	✓	✓

### STUDENT LOAN MYTH ALERT:

Direct Loan Consolidation can save you money.

You'll sometimes hear people recommend Direct Loan Consolidation as a cost-saving measure, but the truth is it can be exactly the opposite.

When you consolidate through the government, you have the option of extending your payment term, which can lower your monthly payments – but also cost you more in interest over the life of the loan. The option may make sense if you need the lower payments today, but it's always good to be aware of how changing the terms of your loan will affect your bottom line.



# FEDERAL LOAN REFINANCING CONSIDERATIONS

## or, Should I refinance my federal student loans?

A discussion about student loan refinancing student loans would be incomplete without addressing the considerations for refinancing federal loans. After all, the vast majority of the \$1.2 trillion in outstanding education debt is made up of federal loans.

The main thing to understand is that when you refinance federal student loans through a private lender, you lose some of the features and benefits that come along with those loans. So if you think you'll need those things, you might be better off keeping your loans with the government. But if you don't need them, and your priority is saving money, then refinancing federal loans could be a great option for you.

What are these federal loan features we're referring to? The big ones can be broken down into three categories:

### **FORGIVENESS PROGRAMS**

The most common are the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program (PSLFP) and the Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program. If you work in either of these fields, including as a public defender or doctor at a public hospital, you'll want to see if one of these programs applies before refinancing federal loans.

### **SPECIAL REPAYMENT PLANS**

Federal loans offer a few different repayment options that are not available with private lenders, including a graduated repayment plan in which payments start out low and increase over time. Another example is income-driven repayment such as Pay As You Earn, or PAYE, and Income Based Repayment, or IBR, which allow borrowers with high debt-to-income ratios to make lower monthly payments, with the remaining principal eligible for forgiveness after 20 to 25 years. Typically, a borrower who would benefit from PAYE would not also qualify for a lower rate through refinancing. It should also be noted that both graduated and income-driven repayment options typically cost the borrower more in interest over time.

### **DEFERMENT AND FORBEARANCE**

Most federal loans will allow you to temporarily put payments on hold due to financial hardship through deferment or forbearance. Some private lenders do offer forbearance due to financial hardship. If that's an important feature for you, you'll want to check with the new lender before refinancing federal loans.

## **STUDENT LOAN MYTH ALERT:**

### **You can't refinance federal student loans.**

A common misconception about refinancing student loans is that borrowers can't refinance federal loans – a myth that was perpetuated by media coverage of the proposed student loan refinancing legislation that was put forward in 2014 by Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass). While the bill was blocked (twice) by Senate Republicans, many journalists failed to mention that federal student loan refinancing is actually available now – no legislation required.

While most traditional lenders have not historically offered federal loan refinancing, the option is available through SoFi and a few other companies. In fact, the majority of SoFi's outstanding student loan debt is made up of refinanced federal student loans.



# REFINANCING CRITERIA

## or, How do I qualify for a lower interest rate?

The general rule of thumb for any kind of refinancing is that the better shape your finances are in, the more likely you are to qualify for a lower rate. For example, here are a few of the common criteria that many lenders are looking for:

- **In good standing with current loans**
- **Strong monthly cash flow**
- **Good credit score (typically 700 or higher)**

Because SoFi is a non-bank lender, we also use non-traditional criteria to determine creditworthiness (to the benefit of our borrowers), including:

- **Graduated from an accredited four-year university or graduate program**
- **Good employment history**
- **Currently employed or have firm job offer**

### Who refinances?

Three examples of real SoFi borrowers, their characteristics and what they saved by refinancing their loans.



#### Kate

- Graduated from Cal State Fullerton with a BS in Business four years ago
- Works as a merchandiser for a clothing company
- Makes \$95,000/year
- 739 credit score
- Reduced rate by 2.28%
- Kept same term
- Reduced monthly payment by \$137/month

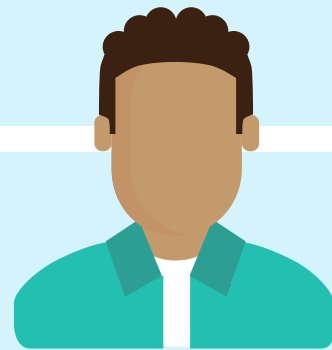
**Total interest savings: \$16,000**



#### Sam

- Will receive an MBA from Vanderbilt in one month
- Accepted an offer from a major retailer as a financial analyst
- Starting salary \$115,000/year
- 770 credit score
- Reduced rate by 1.80%
- Kept same term
- Reduced monthly payment by \$215/month

**Total interest savings: \$38,000**



#### Mark

- Graduated from Loma Linda Dental School four years ago
- Works as a family dentist
- Makes \$175,000/year
- 803 credit score
- Reduced rate by 1.41%
- Chose a shorter term
- Increased monthly payment by \$800/month

**Total interest savings: \$46,000**



# STUDENT LOAN TERMINOLOGY CHEAT SHEET



## All the terms you need to know to ace your student loans

### THE BASICS

**PRINCIPAL:** The original amount of money borrowed, plus any CAPITALIZED INTEREST and fees (such as an ORIGINATION FEE).

**TERM:** The amount of time the loan will be in repayment.

**ANNUAL PERCENTAGE RATE (APR):** The cost of borrowing, expressed as an annual percentage.

**ACCRUED INTEREST:** The amount of interest that has accumulated on a loan since your last payment.

### THE POTENTIAL PITFALLS

**ORIGINATION FEE:** A fee that some lenders charge for processing the loan application, or in lieu of upfront interest.



*Borrower tip: To minimize incremental costs on your loan, look for lenders that offer low or no fees.*

**DEFERMENT:** The temporary postponement of loan repayment during which time interest may or may not continue to accrue. In the case of federal loans, the government may pay interest on your Perkins, Direct subsidized and/or subsidized Stafford loans.

**FORBEARANCE:** The temporary postponement of loan repayment during which time interest typically continues to accrue.

**CAPITALIZED INTEREST:** When ACCRUED INTEREST is added to your loan's PRINCIPAL balance, typically after a period of non-payment such as FORBEARANCE.



*Borrower tip: If you make payments on time each month, you'll keep accrued interest in check. However, after a period of missed or reduced payments (such as FORBEARANCE), accrued interest may be CAPITALIZED, which increases your loan's PRINCIPAL and costs you more money in the long run. Since interest is charged as a percent of principal, the more often interest is capitalized, the more interest you'll pay. This is a good reason to use forbearance only in emergency situations.*

### THE MONEY-SAVERS

**AUTOMATED CLEARING HOUSE (ACH):** An automatic loan payment that transfers directly from your bank account to your lender or loan servicer each month.



*Borrower tip: Not only can automatic payments keep you from forgetting to pay your bill, but many lenders also offer small interest rate deductions for enrolling in ACH.*

**REFINANCE:** Taking out a new loan at a lower interest rate to pay off your original loan(s), effectively lowering your overall interest rate.

**PREPAYMENT:** Paying more than the minimum monthly payment or paying off a loan early.



*Borrower tip: Both federal and private education loans allow for penalty-free prepayment, which means you can pay more than the monthly minimum or make extra payments without incurring a fee. The more you do it, the sooner you'll be done with your loans – and the less interest you'll spend over the life of your loans.*

# OPTIMIZING YOUR LOAN

## or, How do I pick the best refinance options for my situation?

After you qualify to refinance, you may be given a range of loan options to choose from, for example fixed vs. variable interest rates and shorter vs. longer terms. In order to determine the best combination for your situation, it's helpful to understand how each of these factors affect your monthly payments, lifetime interest savings and speed of loan pay-off.

### Fixed Rate vs. Variable (or Floating) Rate Loans

#### Fixed rate student loans typically have:

- A rate that stays the same throughout the life of the loan
- A higher rate than variable rate student loans
- Payments that stay the same over the life of the loan

#### Variable rate student loans typically have:

- A rate that's tied to another "index" rate, for example the prime rate or LIBOR
- A lower initial rate than fixed rate student loans
- Payments (and total interest cost) that change based on interest rate changes



*Borrower tip: If you plan to pay off your loan relatively quickly, then a variable rate loan can be a cost-saving option. But be aware that the longer it takes you to pay off the loan, the more opportunity there is for interest rates to rise – taking your loan's rate with it.*

### Shorter Term vs. Longer Term

#### A shorter term (e.g., 5 years) typically:

- Offers a lower interest rate than longer term
- Requires a higher monthly payment than longer term
- Saves more money on total interest than longer term

#### A longer term (e.g., 10 years) typically:

- Offers a higher interest rate than shorter term
- Requires a lower monthly payment than shorter term
- Costs more money in total interest than shorter term



*Borrower tip: If you can comfortably afford a higher monthly payment, a shorter term can be a cost-saving option – and as a bonus you'll be done with your loan that much sooner.*



# CHOOSING A LENDER

## or, How do I find the right lender for me?

Not all student loan refinance lenders are alike. When comparing lenders to determine where to refinance, here are some questions to consider that can help you make your decision:

<b>INTEREST RATES</b>	<b>Is the lender offering a competitive rate?</b> <b>What will your total savings be?</b>
<b>FLEXIBILITY</b>	<b>Can the lender refinance private and federal loans?</b> <b>Do they offer fixed and variable rate loans?</b> <b>Do they offer a choice between shorter term and lower monthly payments?</b>
<b>ADDITIONAL BENEFITS</b>	<b>Does the lender offer forbearance options in case of sudden financial hardship?</b> <b>Can they help with career and networking needs?</b> <b>What other benefits do they offer?</b>
<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>Is the lender's application online?</b> <b>How long does the application take on average?</b> <b>Do they offer a dedicated client service contact to answer questions?</b>

## Putting it all together

Is student loan refinancing right for you? For some borrowers, it's a no-brainer. For others, it might be an option later on. The bottom line is that it's good to give your loans a second look every so often, because the rate you were given when you took out the loan isn't necessarily the rate you're stuck with for life.

And now that you have all the info, you can make a more confident decision about refinancing your student loans. The sooner you get started, the sooner you'll save.

Learn more about consolidating and refinancing student loans with SoFi: [Student Loan Refinancing](#).

*This piece is intended to provide useful information on the subject of student loan refinancing, but does not purport to provide legal or tax advice.*

## About SoFi

SoFi is a leader in marketplace lending and the largest provider of student loan refinancing, with over \$2,500,000,000 in loans issued. We help ambitious professionals accelerate their success with student loan refinancing, MBA loans, mortgages, and personal loans. Our non-traditional underwriting approach takes into account merit and employment history among other factors to provide unique financial and investment products. We offer individual and institutional investors the ability to create positive social impact on the communities they care about while earning compelling rates of return.

