Amortize, the dictionary tells us, is the gradual extinction of a future obligation. It’s also what occurs when we repay our mortgage through our monthly payments.

Recently, I have had two people ask me if they should repay their mortgage early. While there are psychological benefits to wiping away what is often a person’s largest debt, there are several things you should consider before taking steps to pay off your mortgage ahead of schedule.

While there are no “one size fits all” rules in personal finance, prepaying a mortgage can make sense if you can meet these eight guidelines:

1. When you have no other debts, such as credit card debt, at greater rates of interest. If you are paying an APR of 18% on your credit card debt and 5% on your mortgage, pay your credit card debt first. Always repay the highest APR loan first, if you have extra money to pay toward your debts.

2. When you have maximized your retirement savings, particularly up to the limit that your employer matches your contributions to your 401k, 403b, or other retirement plan. The Federal Reserve has estimated that approximately 38% of households making extra payments on their mortgage are making the wrong choice and underfunding their retirement savings as a result.

3. When you have established an emergency fund of three to six months living expenses. This is one of the key steps in financial planning, as it enables you to face life head-on and handle those little and, sometimes, big things that come your way. Importantly, an emergency fund allows you to raise your
deductibles on your property insurances, thus freeing more money for investing, as well as paying toward your mortgage.

4. When you do not believe you can earn rates of return greater than the rate of interest on your mortgage from your investments.

5. When the only reason you itemize your deductions for federal taxes is due to your mortgage. If this is you, there is no tax benefit to itemizing your mortgage interest. For those of you that really believe that tax deductions save you money, remember that they work this way: You pay $1 of interest and the federal tax deduction saves you $0.25 (assuming a 25% tax rate, more if you have state income taxes). I'll tell you what, you give me $1 and I'll give you $0.40 for as many dollars as you want to give me. That's a 60% better deal than the one you get from the IRS. I doubt I have many takers.

6. When you have already established an adequate insurance program; life, medical, disability-income are all particularly important if you have financial dependents.

7. When you are not already “underwater” with your mortgage. It makes little financial sense to prepay, if there is a chance you may face foreclosure. Besides, if you are one of these homeowners it is probably best to put your money in an emergency fund – which you may not have – in order to help you with your transition to a new life.

8. When you have a burning desire to be debt free. I have no problem with people who want the sure “return” of not paying mortgage interest, as opposed to taking on the risk of investment markets. Please, however, make the best decision for your circumstances, not the “one size fits all” answers of the radio talk-show hosts.
University of Missouri researchers have come up with a new Web-based program to help women experiencing abuse develop individualized safety plans and better assess the severity of their situations.

Unlike current Internet resources, the decision-aid program provides women with personalized assessments of the danger of their situations.

The program generates a series of initial questions and follow-up questions for each woman, and then creates individualized safety plans based on their responses.

A safety plan may include talking with children about what to do if violence suddenly occurs, establishing a safe place to go at a moment’s notice, or hiding money and a change of clothes somewhere in or outside the home. Women also receive information about legal processes and community resources.

“The decision-aid provides anonymity and guidance to women who aren’t comfortable talking about their situations,” said Tina Bloom of the Sinclair School of Nursing.

“It helps women think through their decisions, make more informed decisions and decrease decisional conflict – that sort of feeling like they don’t know what to do, what their options are or where to look for help,” she said.

In the pilot study of the program, the researchers found that women’s decisional conflicts were reduced after one use of the decision-aid.

The program is designed to help women who don’t have access to traditional resources, including shelters and doctors. The decision-aid will be available to women anywhere they have safe access to the Internet.

Additionally, kiosks with the program will be located in hospitals, doctor's offices, libraries and mental health care facilities.

“In intimate partner violence situations, there are ongoing patterns of violence – the more exposure that women have to violence, the greater their risk for injuries and negative health consequences, both mental and physical,” Bloom said.

“The goal of the decision-aid program is to give women more personalized and confidential aid options and prevent extended exposure to violence by changing their safety behaviors. By making help easily accessible, we can improve women’s health outcomes,” she added.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU Residential Life adds new housing options

By Hannah Wiese
July 27, 2010 | 6:04 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — When MU Residential Life offered to pay returning students to cancel their housing contract, MU junior Sami Ware jumped at the chance.

"I was like, hey, I need money," Ware said.

Ware was one of the first students to accept the offer. Although she was excited to receive the $1,000 credit to her MU account, she had a tough time finding a place off-campus to live.

"Honestly, I just got a place to live, like, an hour ago," she said Tuesday afternoon. "Up until now, it was really bad."

Ware was one of about 100 students who took the incentive. The original offer was $500, but when only about 35 students accepted it, it was bumped up to $1,000, said Frankie Minor, director of Residential Life.

"Some people expected there to be a huge surge when we offered students the incentive, but actually there wasn’t," Minor said. "That tells you that the majority of those students really like living on campus."

This was the first time Residential Life offered students monetary credit as an incentive to break their contract, and it was part of Residential Life’s efforts to house the incoming freshmen class. For the first time in Minor’s 17 years at MU, a cap was set on the number of returning students who could live in the residence halls so that freshmen could be accommodated.
The cap is 1,900 returning student contracts, and it was based on the prediction that the incoming freshman class would be about the same as last year's class of 5,589 students. Also in play is that typically, a number of returning students apply for housing as a safety net then find housing off campus, Minor said. Residential Life expected the number of contracts to drop to about 1,425 by the time school starts.

While the number of returning contracts dropped, the number in the freshmen class rose. Residential Life received 5,437 contracts from freshmen by the June 1 deadline and 195 afterward. To make room for the freshmen, they offered the $1,000 credit.

Other efforts to accommodate what Minor said might be the largest freshmen class ever at MU — the official enrollment will be tallied on the 20th day of classes — include two new off-campus housing options: the return of Tiger Diggs and the re-opening of Hudson Hall.

**Off-campus housing**

MU now offers the vacant Prunty Hall, northeast of MU at Stephens College, as a housing option. Previously, MU has rented Hillcrest Hall from Stephens. “At most, we will have 108 students over there,” Minor said of Prunty Hall, 1310 Windsor St.

The students will be there no longer than a semester. As rooms open, students at Prunty will have the opportunity to move to main or extended campus. After fall semester, they will be required to move. Minor said that although Prunty will be coed, it will house mostly men, making them “kind of an anomaly” at Stephens College, which as a women’s college has few male students.

TRUE Scholars, another new housing option, is at the former Liahona House, 1211 University Ave. There, 26 sophomores, juniors and seniors, along with a staff member, will share a kitchen, dining room and living room. Students are still required to purchase a meal plan.

Tiger Diggs, at Campus View Apartments, 301 Campus View Drive, was not supposed to be used for extended campus, as it has in past years. This year, it will house 336 students. Originally, Mizzou Quads at the Campus Lodge apartment complex was planned to be the only off-campus MU housing option.
Reopening

Hudson Hall, which closed for renovations in December 2008, will reopen. About 20 extra bed spaces in Hudson were added by temporarily converting study rooms into bedrooms, Minor said. As soon as space is available, the students will be transferred to permanent rooms, and the bedrooms will be converted back into study lounges.

Another space-saving tactic is assigning roommates to about 85 student staff members with double-sized rooms. Residential staff members usually do not have roommates.

Those in temporary housing will be the first ones moved once rooms become available.

When Hudson reopens, so will Rollins Dining Hall. An exterior staircase will allow students to access the dining hall without entering the residential hall. Gillett Hall, which is attached to Rollins and Hudson, closed in December 2009 and is scheduled to open in August 2011.

Closed

Cramer and Stafford residential halls are closed permanently. They will be demolished to make room for University Hospital to build its Patient Care Tower. Demolition of Stafford is planned to start Aug. 23, the first day of classes, Minor said.

Residential Life planned for the loss of these buildings. They increased the number of beds built in College Avenue Hall by about 100 and built 326 more beds than originally planned. The new connecting hallway between Defoe and Graham halls also added about 60 beds. These additions nearly equal the capacity of Cramer and Stafford halls.

What's next

Freshmen who submitted their housing contract by the June 1 deadline are guaranteed housing through Residential Life. Minor said they are able to house all of the women who submitted their contracts after the date and expect to be able to do the same with the men.

Rooms become available when students cancel contracts or decide to move out. Minor said they lose about 300 to 400 contracts before the first day of school. Many are men who choose to live at a fraternity house. So far, 150 freshmen have canceled their
contracts. About 8 to 10 percent of the residence hall population leaves at semester for various reasons, Minor said.

Minor said Residential Life is working with the Office of Admissions and division of enrollment management to come up with a series of scenarios for housing in the coming years.

"The challenge is we have to make our decisions pretty early on," Minor said.

The prediction for the size of the freshmen class is made in November or early December of the preceding year, about nine months before classes start.
Access Missouri scholarship amounts revealed by state

BY TIM BARKER | tharker@post-dispatch.com | Posted: Tuesday, July 27, 2010 4:33 pm | No Comments Posted

Students and parents on Tuesday learned the extent of the state’s slashing of the Access Missouri scholarship fund that offers need-based aid to college students.

The program, which lost more than half of its funding in Gov. Jay Nixon’s June budget cuts, will offer a maximum of $950 to students attending four-year public schools, according to the Missouri Department of Higher Education. That’s down from nearly $1,700 last year.

Students at four-year private institutions will receive a maximum of $1,900, while those at two-year public schools will get up to $275 for the year.

The cuts could have been worse. The beleaguered scholarship fund was reduced from $82 million to $32 million by Nixon. At the same time those cuts were announced, it was revealed that the state’s student loan authority would be kicking in $30 million to use for scholarships.

The Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority confirmed last week the money would be added to Access Missouri, giving it a little over $60 million to spend this year.

Further complicating matters, however, is the fact that the number of eligible students is soaring. More than 102,000 students can receive Access Missouri money this year, compared with 86,000 last year, according to education officials.

Students who receive support from Bright Flight - which targets the state’s top students - are still awaiting word on their scholarships. The smaller program also lost money in Nixon’s budget cuts.

Those awards are estimated to be around $1,500, though a final number will not be known until the state receives a last round of test scores to determine the number of eligible students.
State could be violating its own scholarship law

By David A. Lieb/The Associated Press
July 27, 2010 | 5:35 p.m. CDT

JEFFERSON CITY — An influx of needy students and a decrease in state aid have combined to place Missouri in the awkward position of potentially violating its own law when distributing college scholarships during the upcoming school year.

The Missouri Department of Higher Education said Tuesday that it doesn't expect to have enough money to meet the minimum scholarship amounts set by a 2007 law that created the state's main financial needs-based scholarship program.

In a letter sent to college and university leaders, the state agency cited a twofold reason:

— A cut of more than one-fourth of the money available for Access Missouri scholarships to a total of around $60 million, instead of the $83 million that lawmakers originally had budgeted for the 2010-2011 academic year.

— A nearly 19 percent increase in students eligible for the scholarships to a total of 102,000, compared with 86,000 during the recently concluded academic year.

When funding falls short of the amount necessary to fully fund scholarships, state law requires that scholarships be reduced proportionately.

But the 2007 law that created the Access Missouri program never contemplated such a severe budget crunch.

The law established a scholarship range of $300 to $1,000 for students at community colleges, $1,000 to $2,150 for those at public universities, and $2,000 to $4,600 for students at private institutions.
The Department of Higher Education said the scholarship amounts are estimated to fall just short of those minimum thresholds. It said community college students are projected to receive $275, public university students $950 and private school students $1,900.

Missouri’s law doesn’t specify any consequences for failing to meet the minimum scholarship amounts.

Higher education officials had little choice but to go below the law’s requirements, said Leroy Wade, the assistant higher education commissioner for financial aid.

"It kind of is what it is," Wade said. "Given the amount of students we’re anticipating will receive awards and the available funds, this was the amount we felt confident we would be able to pay."

Wade said officials plan to re-examine the number of eligible students in August and again in December to see if any adjustments need to be made to the scholarship amounts.

The scholarship reduction could have been larger.

Gov. Jay Nixon last month cut about $50 million from Access Missouri scholarships, citing an expected shortfall in state revenues. But a portion of that cut was offset when the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority decided to give $30 million to the state for Access Missouri scholarships.
Cuts to scholarship fund are mitigated

Access Missouri, a scholarship fund that Gov. Jay Nixon slashed by more than half in budget cuts last month, will pay a maximum of $950 to students attending four-year public colleges, according to the Missouri Department of Higher Education. That's down from nearly $1,700 last year.

Students at four-year private schools will get $1,900 at most, while those at two-year public schools will get up to $275.

The cuts could have been worse. Nixon reduced the need-based scholarship fund to $32 million from $82 million. But the state's student loan authority kicked in $30 million to use for scholarships.

While the awards are shrinking, the number of eligible students has soared to more than 102,000 this year, compared with 86,000 last year, education officials said.

Students who receive support from Bright Flight, which targets the state's top students, are still awaiting word on their scholarships.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU doctoral student studies body image among black women

By Theresa Berens
July 27, 2010 | 5:27 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Rashanta Bledman grew up in South Central Los Angeles, a mostly black and Latino neighborhood, where curves were prized.

When she moved to a largely white college in Orange County, she noticed she didn’t look like everyone else. Thinness was considered more important than shape, she discovered.

Bledman had conversations about this with her friends, particularly her black, female friends.

“We didn’t want to be really thin, but we didn’t want to be heavy,” she said. “We wanted to have a small waist, but at the same time have curves.”

Despite this, Bledman said she believed that the topic was not something that was discussed in the open — instead limited to small circles of friends.

Today, talking about body image is part of Bledman’s academic work.

She is a doctoral student in MU’s department of educational, school and counseling psychology. Her studies have explored how black women feel about their bodies, because existing research had indicated a mixture of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the way they look.

Earlier this summer, her research won a graduate student award from the American Psychological Association's graduate student award.

Bledman surveyed 79 black women, mostly MU students to find out how satisfied they were with their bodies. Using a set of images, she asked them to select their actual body shape and their ideal.
Most participants said generally, they were satisfied with their bodies, but given the chance to change something, they would.

"Many of the women said that they would have a smaller waist, a flatter stomach and a bigger butt," Bledman said. "That's a hard shape to really maintain, unless you're, like, Kim Kardashian."

Although she said her research cannot be generalized to the entire African-American population, she said she hopes her research will validate women's experiences and let them know other women feel the same way.

"There's a societal idea that you should be thin, or you should look a certain way, and sometimes you can't look that way," she said. "It's really hard for an African-American woman to look like a thin white woman."

Columbia native Renella Ballinger, 45, identifies with Bledman's findings. She said she is pretty satisfied with her figure but sometimes struggles to keep weight off.

"I've always been naturally thinner," Ballinger said. "The weight that I've gained has mainly come with age. I'm not really dissatisfied; it's just hard to maintain without being active."

Most of her dissatisfaction centers upon her lower torso, she said.

"They call us thick," she said. "We're built that way."

Ballinger's sister, Twanda Thomas, 41, agreed with the findings.

She said her concerns about weight have less to do with body image and more to do with health.

"I think we get more worried about (weight) because of diabetes and hypertension," Thomas said.
MU reaches out to its fans on Facebook

By Janese Silvey

Tuesday, July 27, 2010

When the University of Missouri decided to take advantage of Facebook, the goal was to “leave no M-I-Z unanswered.”

Sure enough, Mizzou’s fan page has become a string of mini-conversations between MU and its supporters. Earlier this month, for instance, a Mindy Warman-Plemmons posted “Iuv mu” on the cyber wall, only to receive an “Aw, thanks! We love you, too!” response from MU.

Responding to everyone is a lofty goal that isn’t always met these days as MU has more than 104,300 fans. Still, the popular social network site has become a way for the university to connect with prospective students, alumni and fans on a more personal level.

“Facebook is a way for us to accomplish not only getting news and information out to people but a way for people to interact with us a little more personally,” said Lori Croy, manager of the Web communications department. “It’s a reflection of what people are talking about in the community. It is a community, and we treat it that way.”

Croy manages the Web team, but she’s not the identity behind the university’s Facebook presence: That’s a secret in hopes of making MU’s Facebook presence a single voice. Doing so means a lot of behind-the-scenes interaction to make sure MU comes off as a friendly soul willing to spread school pride but also able to clear up inaccurate postings and field a variety of admissions questions.

“If we don’t know the answer, we’ll find someone who does,” Croy said, calling the Facebook page a “24-hour online focus group.”

MU’s page is a far-reaching hub but seems to mostly attract comments from prospective students and from fans just wanting to give a shout-out to the university. That’s different for Columbia’s private schools.

Stephens College’s Facebook page attracts mostly alumni sharing achievements and accomplishments, spokeswoman Sara Cendon Fernandez said. Columbia College’s Facebook wall is filled with posts from students wanting to know which professor or class section to take. The audience is somewhat by design; Columbia College’s alumni association has its own Facebook page.
Entities that haven’t embraced social media are finding that others are doing it for them. Columbia Public Schools, for instance, has a community page that was created by Facebook but is not administered by the district. Spokeswoman Michelle Baumstark said updating a Facebook page is too time-consuming.

Weaving an occasional status update or response into a normal workday has been a challenge at MU — the school’s page had to swap its “photo of the day” feature with a “photo of the week” because of time issues. But MU fans have stepped up to help, in some cases providing the “Z-O-U” needed to complete Mizzou’s popular chant. And that’s fine with the Web team, Croy said.

“We don’t want to be the only voice,” she said. “Mizzou fans make others feel welcome.”

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.
UM expands online courses

To expand access to college courses and degree programs for students across its four campuses, the University of Missouri System has funded $482,000 in grants to faculty to develop 124 new online courses.

"Faculty members on our campuses realize that today's college students learn in various ways and through various channels," said Steve Graham, senior associate vice president for academic affairs. "Online learning provides students with additional accessibility to college courses while providing faculty an opportunity to teach in ways that leverage current technology. It's a win-win for everyone."

The mix of undergraduate and graduate courses as well as certificate programs include courses in nursing, agro-forestry, health ethics, dental hygiene, respiratory therapy, financial engineering, bioethics and criminology, among others.

The new courses will be ready for students within a year to 18 months.

Funding will be used for technical support to develop the courses as well as for supplies, equipment and software. Depending on the nature of the proposal, some faculty members could receive stipends for their time in developing the courses.

"We currently have online courses in several areas system-wide, but these new courses expand the breadth of topics we offer," Graham said. "This helps broaden the appeal for students, particularly those who balance work, school and family demands."

In addition to the grants, the Academic Affairs Office has also funded at least one new instructional designer on each campus to help faculty develop quality online courses. A two-day faculty workshop was held in July to build a network of support utilizing faculty members experienced in teaching online and instructional designers.

The workshop discussed myths about online teaching as well as strategies to help faculty optimize technology in online courses. A similar workshop is planned for August.

"The demand for online courses continues to grow at an exponential rate for both traditional and nontraditional students," said Ronald Phillips, associate professor of architectural studies. "Not only will this infusion of system resources allow the campuses to expand their online offerings, but many of the multimedia capabilities used in online learning can be applied to the traditional classroom, enriching that learning environment as well."

E-Learning is a University of Missouri System strategic priority. Drawing on the university's mission as a land-grant institution, e-Learning will help expand educational opportunities for students by making courses accessible whenever and wherever students are able to learn. Some of the technology used in e-Learning strategies can be applied to traditional classrooms as well.
Community Grocery Brings Affordable Healthy Food to Inner City
St. Louis, Missouri neighborhood co-op provides healthful options to an underserved part of the city

Véronique LaCapra | St. Louis, Missouri 28 July 2010
Photo: VOA - A. Chimes

The Old North co-op, a community-run inner city grocery store, specializes in selling locally-grown produce.

U.S. First Lady Michele Obama has drawn national attention to the problem of "food deserts" - neighborhoods that may have plenty of McDonalds and other fast food restaurants, but no supermarket with fresh vegetables and other affordable, healthy foods.

Residents of the central-U.S. city of St. Louis are working to turn one inner-city neighborhood from "food desert" to oasis. They've opened a community-run grocery store - the first of its kind in the city.

Food desert

For the past decade, the Old North St. Louis neighborhood has had only one grocery store. But the dilapidated market carries mostly junk food, cleaning supplies and liquor. Its tiny produce section consists of a handful of sorry-looking vegetables and fruit.

Old North resident Etta Adams says until now, she's had to do her shopping outside the neighborhood. "Well, there haven't been nothing over here - too much to - you know, to shop from."

Kara Lubischer is a community development specialist with the University of Missouri Extension. She says the nearest major supermarket is about 5 kilometers away. "Which doesn't sound that far if you have a car, but it sounds very far if you have to get on a bus, and you have to carry your week's worth of groceries home with you."

About 40 percent of households in this mostly African-American, low-to-middle income
neighborhood don't have access to a car.

"The idea for a grocery store came directly from the residents," Lubischer says people in the neighborhood liked the idea of a food co-op: a community-owned grocery, where members would have a say in how the store would be run, and what products it would carry.

Almost all the work for the co-op project has been carried out by volunteers.

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Food Oasis**

On Saturday, a diverse crowd packed into the newly-renovated one-storey brick building, for the grand opening of the Old North Grocery Co-op.

"I'm very happy about it," said neighborhood resident Gudayzke. "I don't know whether this will be my main stopping point or not, but it certainly does give me another option."

Luz Maria Evans agreed. "I mean it's great because now we can have something convenient to, to make the shopping's list. Everything you need. Near."

Old North St. Louis Restoration Group director Sean Thomas says the co-op will sell a variety of foods and household items. "This store will be structured to suit the tastes and desires of the community who are here, as well as other customers who might come from outside the neighborhood."

Thomas says the store will also rely as much as possible on local producers. "One of the farmers we've been working with from the very beginning is a guy named Rusty Lee."

**Local produce**

Rusty Lee and his family raise vegetables and livestock on his farm in Truxton, Missouri, about 100 kilometers west of St. Louis.
Farmer Rusty Lee supplies fresh meat and produce to the Old North Grocery Co-op.

He has recruited other local farmers to help him supply the co-op with fresh produce and meat. "We saw it as an opportunity to help somebody out, to help ourselves out. It's a market that no one has really been servicing."

Old North resident Claretha Morant is grateful for Lee's efforts to bring fresh produce to her neighborhood. "For us peoples that don't have transportation and stuff, you know, that's a big improvement for us."

Without a car, Morant has had to depend on friends and neighbors to take her grocery shopping in other parts of the city. "And now, I can just go on my own, you know, just get the bus and go on my own now. I'm glad of that. I'm proud of it."

Organizers stress the co-op is open to all shoppers - not just members.

But in St. Louis, a community-run grocery is an untested concept. Its survival may depend on how willing area residents are to change their shopping and eating habits.

Find this article at: