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Flying to College on the Cheap

As Fares Rise, Students and Teachers Can Still Snare Deals

By SCOTT MCCARTNEY

Higher airfares have raised the cost of higher education, from trips home for college students at Thanksgiving to study-abroad semesters. But two little-known companies that negotiate big discounts with airlines can save hundreds of dollars for students and their ticket-buying parents.

Even though airlines have piled on fees and eliminated most special discounts like senior-citizen fares and half-price tickets for young children, one vestige of airline goodwill remains. Several air carriers still offer special deals for students -- and teachers as well.

The student-discount fares aren't offered directly by airlines or most travel sellers. Instead, they are available only through a backdoor channel -- a few travel companies that negotiate directly with airlines, verify buyers are students or teachers and offer discounted fares only on their own Web sites and through their own travel agents.

The two largest discount student travel sellers are STA Travel Inc., a company founded in Australia that claims to be the largest seller of student travel in the world, and StudentUniverse.com Inc., a Waltham, Mass., agency founded in 1992 that now is only an online travel seller. They offer different rates for trips because they have different agreements with airlines.

One of the biggest advantages is that the student-discount fares are available as cheap one-way tickets or round-trips without many of the restrictions that regular air fares carry, such as maximum-stay limits. That gives students and parents flexibility in buying tickets to go to college or for study-abroad programs even when they don't yet know exam schedules or when they can return home at the end of a semester.

Between Dallas and Hartford, Conn., for example, STA Travel offers a \$242 one-way fare for an American Airlines flight on Dec. 20; the regular price offered by AMR Corp.'s American is \$1,006 one-way, according to Orbitz Inc. Between New York and London on the same date, StudentUniverse.com had a \$364 fare on Virgin Atlantic Airways Ltd., compared to \$865 on Virgin's Web site. Coming home from the Sorbonne at Christmas? StudentUniverse had a one-way Paris-to-Los Angeles fare for \$673 on Dec. 18 on United Airlines flights, while the cheapest offering on UAL Corp.'s United Web site for the same trip was \$4,740.

Not all markets have discounts, and often the discounts are small. On round-trips I checked for a Dec. 20 departure and Jan. 11 return, STA Travel offered a \$291 ticket on American for a New York-Miami roundtrip, compared to \$310 at Orbitz for the American flights. Between Boston and Chicago for the

same dates, the lowest price on American and United was \$450 for the same dates; StudentUniverse offered the same flights at \$423.

Brianne Eggers, a recent graduate of San Diego State University, says she traveled abroad four times in her college career, all with assistance and savings from STA Travel. "I checked around but they always had the best price," she said. "It really helps when you're paying for school, too."

STA Travel requires that students purchase a \$22 International Student Identity Card (there's a version for teachers, too) that verifies their status for one year. The card offers discounts beyond airfare, and is sometimes required for study-abroad programs. STA Travel sells the card, and requires that purchasers fax or email a copy of a valid student ID, a current class schedule or a tuition receipt to the company for verification.

STA Travel grew with a network of offices near college campuses, but recently decided to close 48 of its 65 offices and focus mostly on its online selling (www.statravel.com) and call center ( 800-781-4040).

StudentUniverse doesn't require an ISIC and instead has developed a proprietary system to automatically verify a student or teacher's eligibility for the discounts, based in part on student and faculty email addresses. Airlines that participate in its program are satisfied that the verification system works, says Atle Skalleberg, head of research and marketing for StudentUniverse.

The prices StudentUniverse offers are fairly stable, unlike airline offerings that can bounce up and down several times each day, and don't rise closer to departure. "As students procrastinate, we get more competitive," Mr. Skalleberg said.

Airlines often dump seats they don't think will sell at regular prices with "consolidators" -- agencies that can sell seats at depressed prices without forcing the airline to alter its published fares and spark price wars with competitors. The student-discount programs serve the same purpose, airlines say, but have an added advantage: cultivating loyalty among future business travelers -- students who will eventually become regular corporate customers.

Restrictions are relaxed, airlines say, because they recognize it's often difficult for students to plan return trips months in advance. "Student travel requirements are different than the typical leisure passenger or business passenger," says a spokesman for [US Airways Group](#) Inc. And airlines say the deals offered are among the lowest they offer anywhere.

"They are a very good value," said a spokesman for American.

StudentUniverse says it has agreements with 29 airlines, including some of the biggest in the world, like American, [Air France-KLM](#) SA, United, [Deutsche Lufthansa](#) AG, and [British Airways](#) PLC, and its average discount over published rates, based on a study of 900 student purchases, is 14%. Discount airlines such as [Southwest Airlines](#) Co. and [JetBlue Airways](#) Corp. rarely participate in student-discount programs and sometimes have fares that are lower than the student discounts. Continental Airlines Inc., one major carrier that doesn't offer student discounts, says it eliminated that category of discounts along with senior fares several years ago. "With a multitude of published retail discount fares, we don't feel it is necessary to have another category of discounts," a Continental spokesman said.

Availability of good deals rises and falls with the economy, says Renaud Cyr, vice president of airline product at StudentUniverse. When there's lots of travel, airlines are tight with discounts. During slowdowns, ultra-discounted seats are easier to get. Like now.

"I think everybody is looking for an opportunity to fill an empty seat right now," said Mr. Cyr. One airline he declined to identify had long refused to offer discounted seats to StudentUniverse, but is currently negotiating to participate.

Discounts are often focused in college towns like Tallahassee, Fla., for example, but extend to bread-and-butter travel routes like the East Coast shuttles, which often carry faculty back and forth between Boston, New York and Washington, D.C., during the week, and lots of students on weekends.

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