



Off-to-college kids can go overboard on 'essentials'

Five years ago, Carlene Igras spent \$150 on color-coordinated dorm furnishings for her daughter Lyz, 23, then a freshman at college. The lamp has never been used: It was deemed a fire hazard and wasn't allowed into the dorm. The matching sheet set went into storage after one year because the extra-long sheets didn't fit the bed in Lyz's off-campus apartment. Annual attempts to unload the sheets and lamp at yard sales at her home in Bath, N.Y., have failed.



Heather Ainsworth for USA TODAY Lyz Igras, 23, and her mother, Carlene Igras, pose at their Bath, N.Y., home with items purchased five years ago when Lyz went away to college. Today, the Igras' have no use for the octopus lamp and

dorm-sized matching bed set. [Enlarge](#)

Heather Ainsworth for USA TODAY

Lyz Igras, 23, and her mother, Carlene Igras, pose at their Bath, N.Y., home with items purchased five years ago when Lyz went away to college. Today, the Igras' have no use for the octopus lamp and dorm-sized matching bed set.

Back to school is the second-biggest "season" for retail sales, after the year-end holidays, so retailers are marketing up a storm. But with the economy still in the doldrums, most parents can't afford to buy things their college-aged children won't use or don't need. That's likely to affect sales: Parents and students plan to spend an average of \$808.71 on apparel, electronics, dorm furnishings and food items this year, down from \$835.73 last year, according to a [National Retail Federation](#) survey by consumer intelligence firm BIGresearch.

Nearly a third of shoppers told BIGresearch they are making do with last year's items. That's a smart plan, experts say, as the key to smart college shopping is to know what you need — and what you don't. Buying into all the hype about back-to-college shopping can be costly, time-consuming and wasteful given the small spaces dorm-bound college students inhabit.

Sensible shopping "can save you a lot of money and a lot of work moving in," says Jessica Gunzburger, assistant program director for residential life at the [University](#)

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Some items that stores pitch as essentials might surprise a more seasoned college shopper:

- Walmart includes paper shredders on its college checklist. Prices for this "must-have" range from \$12 to \$2,000 at the discounter.
- Target is promoting products including lava lamps, bedspreads, coffee makers, vacuum cleaners and MP3 players in matching colors. The retailer even suggests freshmen contact their roommates so their Target themes don't clash, says spokeswoman Kristy Welker.
- The [Container Store](#) has a toolkit on its college checklist, even though it doesn't sell one. Spokeswoman Nina Smith says that's because "of all the new products that require some assembly." The Container Store offers a \$12 mallet and \$13 screwdriver.

Who needs it?

Even without economic pressures, there are some basic rules that dictate what students should and shouldn't buy. For example, college dorm rooms simply don't have room for a lot of stuff.

"One year a student showed up with a U-Haul," says Erin Foster Zsiga, assistant dean at Bates College in Maine. "If you have to bring a U-Haul, you're probably bringing too much stuff."

Half of the student's belongings didn't even fit into the room, and it went right back home with the student's parents, she says.

"I think she just misunderstood the space," Zsiga says. "There's such a media blitz of back-to-school stuff you can buy."

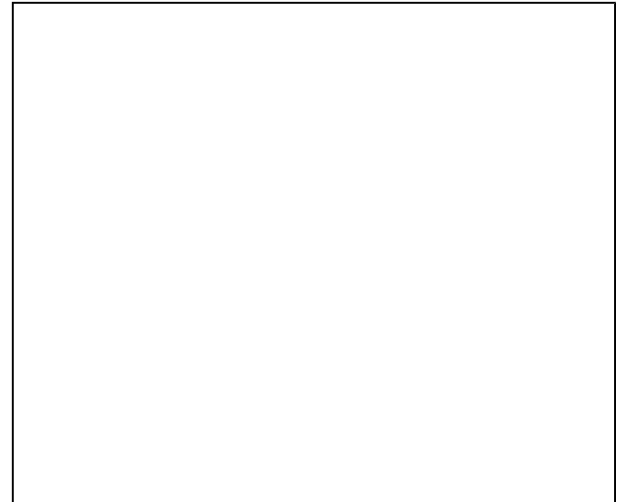
Parents often think their kid has to be prepared for every eventuality, but dorm experts say that's overkill.

"People shouldn't get caught up in having the right things," Gunzburger says. "Part of living in a community is that you can borrow everything you don't have."

More often than not, dormitories provide furnishings and amenities, so you don't need to pack them yourself, Gunzburger says. She recommends that parents and students find out what resources their dorms offer.

Wondering if you need to bring an iron? "Call ahead and see if they have an iron you can check out," she recommends.

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Another problem: Students often think they can bring anything they want as long as they also bring extra storage equipment, Zsiga says.

"What you have to consider is all these storage modules take up a lot of floor space," she says.

Container Store spokeswoman Nina Smith, not surprisingly, says everyone *should* bring extra storage products with them to college.

"Everybody's going to need the basic hanger, the laundry hamper and the extra storage," she says.

Some, however, say the minimalist approach works, too.

"When I came to college, I just brought a change of shirts and shaving equipment, then bought or borrowed as I needed," says Luke Marcott, 21, a junior at Macalester College in Saint Paul. "I had to go back for my laptop and sheets, but I was fine otherwise."

Marcott has it a little easier than most college students — his parents live within walking distance of school. He assumed anything he forgot could be dropped off by his mother but found he barely needed anything else.

Dumpster-bound belongings

You don't have to look far to find pricey dorm furnishings in stores. The Container Store's college checklist includes 118 items, including things it doesn't sell, such as cleaning supplies. Others are specific Container Store products, such as the Elfa compact refrigerator cart, which costs \$129. The fridge is not included.

The retailer also recommends buying a desk, even though dorm rooms typically come with one. The cheapest Container Store desk costs more than \$200. When asked later about the desk, spokeswoman Olescia Hanson said, "We're not saying you have to have every single thing on here."

Zsiga agrees.

"If you're living in a room that's 100 square feet," she says, buying a lot of dorm furnishings is "probably not a good investment." Besides, she says, many students wouldn't want to keep the same furniture year to year.

Parents might expect students to use products such as high-end filing systems after they graduate, but they often wind up in dumpsters, says Kara Dennis, 21, a senior residential assistant at Macalester.

"It can be a huge burden for kids to move out of their freshmen dorms," Dennis says. "A lot of times when they move in, they have a parent to help them, but at the end of the year, they usually don't get that, and it can

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be overwhelming."

Dennis says she's seen expensive speakers, TVs and "nice clothes" in college dumpsters.

Some members of USA TODAY's shopper panel say they wish they had waited until their child got to college to buy clothes because students typically want to wear what's in style at the school instead of clothes parents buy them.

Cynthia Washburn-Nester, director of women's trends at J.C. Penney and the parent of a college sophomore, says college students typically have a "singular wardrobe" that evolves throughout the year as they add and subtract layers.

As anyone who's seen the pajama-bottoms-as-pants trend knows, college is more casual than ever. Washburn-Nester says that while girls were borrowing from their mothers' closets a few years ago, they're now wearing their dads' oversized shirts.

"You can always tell who the freshmen are, because they're dressed a whole lot nicer than everybody else," Dennis says. Eventually, though, "Everyone just wears their more comfortable stuff that doesn't need to be dry cleaned."

Planning on buying only new stuff for your new freshman's dorm? Get with the times, say marketing gurus.

Green is in, says Tina Wells, author of the marketing book *Chasing Youth Culture and Getting it Right*. Many college-bound teens would rather reuse old stuff than buy new, she says. What Wells says some of this year's incoming freshmen are reusing: dorm furnishings, clothes, pricey technology from

last year, and backpacks.

Pop culture expert Watts Wacker says many young people would rather purchase a charming old coffee table at a yard sale than buy something new.

"This is a generation that is yearning for authenticity," says Wacker, CEO of consulting firm FirstMatter. "You can't get that authenticity with something that's made in China from Target."

Target spokeswoman Welker says the retailer's products allow students to express who they are. She says Target is focused on helping students personalize their spaces to be "uniquely" their own.

But Wacker thinks marketers have the wrong idea of what college students want. "The young generation is not as interested in presenting who they are through their possessions as they are through their media," he says.

"Besides," says residential assistant Dennis, "when you walk into a room, and the

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bedspread matches the rug and the lamp and the pillows, it just screams, 'My mom picked out my stuff for me.'

The bedding, decorative pillows, rug, wall decorations, towel and lamps for Lyz Igras were, "kind of a waste of money," says Carlene, 56. "We can't get rid of it."

She advises parents to resist the temptation to spend a lot of money on heavily promoted back-to-school items.

"All those slick ads out there — they woo you in," Igras says. "The best bet is to talk to a current college student. That's really where you get your best advice."

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