

STYLE

Five ways to save when it's time for college

By Anna Marden | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 01, 2011

College tuition is a whopper of a bill, one that in many cases won't be paid off for years to come. So why not save everywhere you can? From online book dealers to less expensive meal plans to vintage clothes shops, there are plenty of ways to cut costs - just ask a broke college student.

1. Buy books and supplies online.

Get the professors' book lists in advance and order now, from Amazon.com, eCampus.com, Half.com, or wherever - there are countless online used bookstores. The prices are amazingly cheap compared to college stores. In most cases, professors leave a reserve copy in the library for students to use while they wait for their online book deliveries. Make sure to find out whether the professor really requires the latest edition, because you can save more when buying older versions of texts. Also, shop online for used graphing calculators and other pricey supplies - the newest Texas Instruments graphing calculator has a color screen, costs \$165, and doubles as a video game device. Professors generally require only functions that can be done on models made a few years ago.

2. Buy a new or used dorm fridge, instead of renting from a university-endorsed company.

Many universities advertise package deals from outside companies for renting microwave/mini fridge combo units. Getting one looks easy and appealing, because they deliver it to the dorm and it's a cool two-in-one design. But the cost for using this unit for one academic year is often more than \$200, which is pricier than buying a fridge and microwave at a big box store. You can also find these items used but in good condition at a tag sale or on Craigslist. Some universities don't let students bring their own microwaves, but they can always borrow from neighbors who rent the combo unit

- and make new friends in the process.

3. Get a smaller meal plan.

Schools usually require students to have a meal plan when they live in the dorms, but the default plan is as many as 15 or 20 weekly meals, and believe it or not, several meals per week can go unused. That doesn't sound right, but in reality, kids go out to dinner, leave campus for a holiday weekend, skip breakfast or prefer to eat it in their rooms. When you do the math, the price of each meal may be upward of \$10, regardless of whether they eat a bowl of cereal or a whole pizza. Instead, if you have the option, sign up for a 10-meal-per-week plan and purchase a good stock of food to eat in the dorm. Parents: Make sure to show your students where the nearest grocery store is, and get them gift cards so they don't "accidentally" spend their food money elsewhere.

4. Decorate dorms with stuff you already have.

Instead of charging two carts full of supplies to the credit card, take a look around the house to see what you can send to school with your kids. They can take posters, photos, mirrors, and more from their rooms at home to their dorm. The same goes for mini-trash cans, hangers, lamps, fans, storage bins, and bedding. If they whine about wanting new stuff, show them the tuition bill and give them a little lesson in finance.

5. Shop for lightly used apparel.

You don't have to go to Salvation Army or Goodwill. There are plenty of trendy thrift shops and used boutiques in most towns and cities. Stores like Second Time Around and Buffalo Exchange have multiple Boston locations and sell fashionable, name-brand clothes for both sexes. They also do consignment, so you can bring in the nice clothes they don't wear anymore and get cash or store credit in exchange.

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