

Spend wisely on college dorm needs

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Before you stock-up for college and dorm room needs, make sure you have a game plan to spend wisely on everything from textbooks to software to food.

“Buying textbooks, decorating a dorm room and feeding a college student can add up, so be aware of student discounts and where to get the best buys,” said Charles Schmidt, a spokesman for the National Association of College Stores. “Take textbooks, for example: The average student spends \$702 on required course materials each year, so stretching those dollars makes a big difference.”

Here are some things every college student should know when shopping for the classroom and the dormitory:

—Play by the book: Buy used books from your college’s store. They typically cost 25 percent less than new textbooks. By shopping at the college store, students are guaranteed the books are the correct versions of those required and experience no lengthy shipping waits—which can cause them to fall behind in class. Also, if you drop a course you usually can exchange textbooks for full credit if you haven’t written in them. At term’s end, you can recoup some cash by selling used books back to the college store.

—Travel deals abound: Book your holiday trips and visits home in advance for the biggest savings. Check out student travel centers on campus. There are many great deals here that might not be available on major travel Web sites.

—Furnish on a budget: Go used when possible. Raid your family’s basement, garage or attic and visit the local Goodwill store for used furniture, appliances and decorations. Swing by the college store, as many offer branded lamps, accessories, posters and other items to help you show school spirit while making a dorm room a home. Be sure to find out what your roommate is bringing to avoid duplicating furnishings and costs.

—Eat for less: College meal plans usually are a good deal. When eating out, always ask for a college discount even if it’s not posted. Check out local shopper publications at the grocery store or around town. They usually have plenty of coupons to satisfy snacking needs for late

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night study sessions.

—Computer and software Specials: That college ID card comes in handy when buying a computer. Most retailers, computer makers and software publishers offer special prices and discounted versions for students. Also consider the college bookstore for deals that vendors might not be advertising online or in mainstream stores. An added bonus of fulfilling your technology needs on campus is you're sure of getting a system that's supported by the institution and best fits your course of study. In addition, college stores often service what they sell and will be aware of your sense of urgency when repairs or upgrades are needed.

—Online isn't always a bargain: Be cautious when purchasing online. Hackers and phishers abound, so be sure of your source. Remember to calculate shipping or handling expenses into the total cost of that discounted textbook or plane ticket. It might not be as cheap as the one from your college bookstore! And, of course, it's more difficult to return textbooks online if you drop a course or to sell them back as easily at the end of the semester.

"Always know a store's refund policy, even your college store. And consider paying cash or by check. You can save hundreds in hidden credit card interchange fees that, if you don't pay off your card balance, you might be paying year after year," said Schmidt.