

Before Arriving on Campus

“*Think of it as MTV’s The Real World without cameras. You need to adjust to other people, but still maintain a strong sense of who you are.*”

—Vinda Rao, Tufts University, Class of 2006

Even if you’ve never been camping before, you probably know the importance of planning for a trip into the deep woods. You’d follow some basic rules: Take only what you need, so you don’t have to carry around extra stuff. Pack enough food and water. Do not, under any circumstances, forget mosquito repellent. Expect to have fun and learn something new, but don’t expect especially private or luxurious accommodations.

Well, mosquitos aren’t a big problem on most college campuses. And relax—food and water are plentiful. But what you take to school—from your mindset to your mittens—may have a lot to do with how smoothly the first semester goes. This chapter will explore some of the questions students face before they head to college for the first time.

What should I take with me—and what should I leave home?

Filled with anticipation for her first semester at New York University, Stephanie Whited (Class of 2005) packed everything she could possibly need, especially clothes. Seven suitcases contained just about her entire wardrobe. “I couldn’t bear to think that I might want to wear something I had left at home,” she remembers.

But when she arrived on campus, Stephanie ended up mostly wearing the same favorites she wore at home in Memphis, Tennessee.

“While I was packing for school and going through my closet at home, I made the mistake of thinking that I might wear things I hadn’t worn in at least a year,” says Stephanie. “But that never happened. A couple of cool T-shirts, one favorite necklace, two pairs of pants, and comfortable sneakers were all I really needed. A lot of the clothes I never wore just filled up space in my dresser and closet and made unnecessary messes when I would have to dig through them to find what I needed.”

All this explains her advice, borne out of experience, when it comes to packing for college: “Bring less clothes.” Danielle Kittredge followed the “less is best” game plan when she prepared for her first year at the University of Pittsburgh. Everything went fine . . . until it started to get chilly, as it always does in western Pennsylvania. “I only brought stuff for the fall,” she says, and T-shirts didn’t exactly keep her toasty after sunset, or in air-conditioned classrooms. Home for Danielle, however, was only about an hour away, in Carmichaels, Pennsylvania, so her folks brought sweaters and sweatshirts early in the semester, leaving one less frostbitten freshman on campus. Motto: Bring enough but not too much.

Before you receive your dorm-room key, you’ll have to decide, like Danielle and Stephanie, what to take with you to campus. The choice is appropriate to start this book, because it epitomizes the book’s theme: Consider your decisions carefully, because you have to live with the results of them.

Stephanie and Danielle turned out just fine. Their packing missteps didn't cast a cloud over their freshman year. They probably won't ever gather their grandchildren in a circle by the fireplace and relate, "Did I ever tell you about the time I didn't pack properly for college?"

But both wish they did things differently, because it would have given them one less thing to be concerned about during one of the most hectic, thrilling times of their lives.

Deciding what to take sounds easy, doesn't it? Well, it's easy to remember most of the things you need. But it's also easy to take much more than you need. If you do take more than you need, you might have a hard time sleeping—because you'll barely have room to stand in your cramped room. And it's easy to forget some small items that can make your life easier, as anyone who's tried to open a can of soup with a pocketknife can tell you.

Of course, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. You know the middle, right? It's that big place somewhere between "going overboard" and "woefully unprepared."

For starters, if you didn't wear it, read it, watch it, listen to it, or use it at home, you probably won't do so at school. The only exceptions are items you absolutely need at school that you may not need at home, such as cold-weather gear.

Students may lean toward underpacking more than overpacking because they know if they forget something, they can still arrange to get it 99 percent of the time, whether they end up buying it or having it shipped from home.

But students warn against overpacking. They know that overpacking causes headaches that can't easily be fixed. Before you pack sweaters or jeans you never wore last winter, or before you take those CDs you've already burned to your computer, ask yourself: Do I really need them?

“I think everyone overpacks for college,” says Michael Minvielle (American University, Class of 2005). He remembers arriving from his hometown of New Orleans for his first year in Washington, D.C. Among his many unnecessary possessions were games such as checkers, chess, and Monopoly. “You get to college, and find out there’s no space for it.”

No time, either.

Erica Johnson took lots of videos with her when she started her studies at the University of Delaware in the fall of 2003: “I didn’t watch any of them.” She was too busy enjoying college life to sit still for movies.

Michael says he also brought many books from home, figuring he’d read them in his free time. He didn’t even open them up. “If I did read, it was for homework.”

When you overpack, you can’t escape it; besides being a constant reminder of your inefficiency, the unused stuff takes up precious space—in your drawers, in your closet, or on your desk. At the end of the year, you either have to lug that stuff back home or store it. Many students just throw it out, accounting for all the overflowing dumpsters parked outside of residence halls every May.

“You’ve got to find a way to box it, or ship it—or store it or throw it out,” Michael Minvielle says. “It’s no fun.”

What to Leave Behind

Items you don’t regularly use now, and have no reason to begin using at school

It’s unlikely you’ll start using them now.

Valuable jewelry

These items can easily be lost or stolen, and they are never necessary on campus.

Anything delicate	If you take such items, you risk hearing a fellow freshman utter the immortal words, “Dude, I am SO sorry!”
Big users of electricity such as microwaves, air conditioners, or hot plates	Unless your college explicitly permits them, they’ll be taken away; you may be breaking the rules, and you’ll still have to lug them home next spring.
Candles	Possession of these is a big violation at most colleges—except for approved religious reasons—because they pose a fire hazard, especially when used by students who’ve been drinking.
Pets	Okay, maybe a goldfish.

What to Take

Clothes

- Plenty of the kinds of clothes you wear every day
- Baseball hats
- At least one semiformal outfit
- Casual shoes, sneakers, dress shoes
- At least 10 days’ worth of underwear
- Socks (good and sport), also hosiery
- Sleepwear
- Clothing appropriate for the weather you’ll encounter while you’re on campus, including, if necessary, a heavy coat or jacket, mittens/gloves, hat, earmuffs, scarf, and boots
- No matter how warm your campus is: a sweater/sweatshirt, windbreaker, and a pair of jeans and/or sweatpants for the cooler days

- No matter how cold your campus is: T-shirts and several pairs of shorts—your dorm might be maintained at an uncomfortably warm temperature
- Hangers
- Rain gear
- Swimming attire
- Flip-flops and a bathrobe for the shower in your shared bathroom
- Gym attire

Food and Food-Related Items

- Snacks that won't spoil, including peanut butter, crackers, pretzels/chips, cookies, and granola bars
- Case of bottled water; powdered drink mix
- Macaroni and cheese mix, noodle-soup packets, breakfast cereal
- For the fridge: fruit, dairy products, soda, jelly, cheese (hold off on buying perishables until you're close to campus)
- Microwave, if permitted; check if your dorm already has one in a common area
- Paper plates, cups, and plastic utensils; two sets of "real" utensils, plus a bowl and plate
- Tea, coffee, sugar, and coffeemaker, if permitted

Essentials

- Personal hygiene supplies and a bucket in which to carry shower supplies
- Comforter, pillow, two pillowcases, four sheets
- Towels, including one beach towel if you think you'll need it, and washcloths
- Backpack
- Pens and pencils
- Alarm clock-radio
- Telephone with answering machine, or cellphone with voicemail

- Rolls of quarters for laundry
- Laundry detergent, bleach, stain remover; basket or duffel bag for laundry
- Iron
- Can opener, pots and pans, and plastic water pitcher
- Umbrella
- Fan
- Duct tape
- Power strip/surge protector

Touches of Home

- Posters (find out how your school prefers these items to be mounted)
- Photos
- High school yearbook
- Decorations/holiday lights, if permitted

Laptop, desktop, or neither?

Expect to use a computer every day you're on campus—whether to check out a professor's online postings, to surf the Web, or to e-mail friends and family, just to name a few frequent uses. The good news is that if you don't have a computer, and don't plan to get one, you'll do fine. But having one is a convenience that's worth paying for. The College Board reports that 2004–2005 college tuition (not counting room and board) averages more than \$20,000 a year at private schools and more than \$5,000 a year at public colleges. With those prices, an investment of less than \$500 for a desktop computer or \$800 for a laptop is a no-brainer. You'll be grateful every time you don't have to wait at a campus computer cluster or pester a friend to borrow her computer. It'll be yours, and you'll be free to use it whenever you want and (if you have a laptop) wherever you want.

"Your laptop becomes the most valuable item you own," says Anisa Mohanty (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Class of 2007). "If I am in my dorm room, I am usually using my laptop

Considering a Laptop?

- ✓ Entry-level laptops cost less than \$800.
- ✓ They're easy to take to class or the library. But they still weigh 3 to 7 pounds, and many students prefer to leave them in their dorm rooms.
- ✓ Their smaller keyboards and displays may make them more difficult to work on for long-term projects.
- ✓ They can be used to access the Internet from any point on campus through wireless fidelity (or wi-fi) networks at the increasing number of colleges that offer them.
- ✓ They are popular targets for thieves. Don't leave yours out of your sight in the library, and don't leave your dorm-room door open with the laptop in plain view.

for research, writing papers or essays, or simply for entertainment. It's also great to be able to take your laptop to your lecture classes to take notes, rather than writing pages upon pages of tedious notes."

That's not to say that the cost of a computer is pocket change, but rather that it's one purchase that justifies getting an additional loan or utilizing a monthly payment plan. A high-quality computer will represent a miniscule percentage of your overall college costs,

Considering a Desktop?

- ✓ Entry-level desktops cost less than \$500.
- ✓ They can be clunky and difficult to move, and will take up desk space in your room.
- ✓ They are more likely to come with bigger screens than laptops, making them a better choice for movie-watching or working on certain kinds of projects.

and it will make your time in school much more productive. If you take a computer, you'll also need a printer and paper.

Chris Deal (Iowa State University, Class of 2007) says his laptop has been indispensable. "The biggest advantage of laptops is their ease of transportation," he says. "Whenever I went home or had to go somewhere to work on a project, it was a breeze to pack up my laptop and go."

Should I have a car on campus?

If you're fortunate enough to have a choice in this matter, it's tempting to say "yes." But having a car on campus can potentially be more hassle than it's worth.

Before you decide to take one with you to school, ask yourself: Why do I want a car? You probably want your car for the same reasons you want it at home—you'll have the freedom to go anywhere you want, whenever you want. It's a natural extension of the other freedoms you'll have while you're at school.

"I had my car on campus and I was really glad I did," says Elizabeth Flynn (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Class of 2004). "It was just convenient to be able to go home when I wanted and not have to depend on someone else for a ride."

But students say the price of that freedom can be high:

- ✓ High parking fees—from \$100 to \$300 per year—are the rule at many colleges. On urban campuses, parking may be severely restricted.
- ✓ Very few parking options may exist on the streets around campus, eliminating the convenience of driving from one part of campus to another.
- ✓ Campus and city parking regulations are enforced with vigor—and steep fines—on and near most colleges. At Texas State University—San Marcos, for example, the cars of "chronic offenders" are impounded and the students face \$150 fines, according to the university's Web site.
- ✓ Those with cars are frequently asked for rides from other students. At first, it's a nice way to make friends and to see the town. After a while, you might be tempted to paint your car yellow and install a meter.

The real issue is: Do you *need* a car? The nature of residential college campuses is that a car is not necessary, unless you have special needs. Everything's on campus, from your classes to the gym to your dorm. You'll do plenty of walking, no doubt, but it's not practical to expect to drive from one campus destination to another.

Elizabeth agreed that sometimes there's a down side to having your own car on campus. "Parking is expensive and a hassle—a year-long parking pass was about \$245 at UT," she says. Another student at an urban university told of spotting people driving around for 45 minutes looking for a parking space.

Still, despite the hassle, a car will come in handy if your campus can accommodate it. Whether you take road trips, drive home, or explore the city, the convenience of door-to-door service is the upside to the hassle.

Many schools, in both urban and rural settings, have good public-transportation options. "Iowa State has a deal with [the city of] Ames where the 'CyRide' bus system is available free to all ISU students," said student Chris Deal. They can take the buses "not only around campus but also to all the major attractions in Ames. I still have a car with me, but I rarely use it."

And while a bus may not be as convenient as a car, the price is usually right, and there's no need to look for a parking space.

How will I "fit in" on campus?

Before freshman year begins, you might spend hours wondering what campus life will be like, how you'll interact with others, and how you'll fit in.

Fitting in, in the broadest sense, really just means being part of your college's community—it doesn't mean you're conforming to any prescribed behavior pattern. The good news, students say, is that the only key to fitting in, as we define it here, is being yourself.

In other words, the only approach rejected on campus is phoniness.

“Don’t sacrifice who you are as an individual in order to fit in—that was middle-school stuff,” says David Doerkin (University of California, Berkeley, Class of 2004).

David recalls two experiences where he had to choose between following the crowd and asserting his individuality—and both times he took the latter approach. Unlike most dorm floors with freshmen, David’s floor was quiet. Students preferred to work at their computers with their doors closed, and socializing was minimal.

“I felt pretty alienated from the rest of the people on my floor,” he says. “I wanted to go out and meet people, and the majority of my floormates were complete shut-ins with little inclination to go to parties. So I decided to go out on my own to meet people, and by a couple of weeks later, I had met some people with whom I’m still friends today. It just took some personal initiative and exploration, not falling into the patterns already adopted by other people.”

Later in his college career, David happened across another issue that can divide campuses and groups of friends—the Greek system. Several of his friends wanted to join a fraternity. David had no interest.

“Instead of just going along with what my friends wanted to do, I spent some time exploring other options and found the co-op housing system, in which I have lived for the past three years,” says David, referring to a group housing system at Berkeley in which students share responsibilities such as management, cooking, and maintenance. “I made many friends living in the co-ops without sacrificing what I wanted socially.”

“I have met most of my best friends by doing what I love to do and being myself. College is the best time to get involved with new activities and meet tons of new people.”

—Lindsay Baran, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Class of 2005

Another key to fitting in—being part of your campus community—is working together with your fellow students. This can seem difficult, since you likely know very few of them. But college freshmen, despite all the talk of diversity, are bound by many similarities:

- ✓ They arrive on campus at roughly the same age.
- ✓ They excelled, to some degree, in high school, and must prove themselves again.
- ✓ They're experiencing their first taste of freedom.
- ✓ They've never lived with a stranger before.
- ✓ They know relatively little about their new living and academic environment.

As a result, basic courtesy—communication, cooperation, and respect—accomplishes more than any planned personality approach. As the following chapters will show, open communication, which includes listening as well as speaking, is a key to navigating the complexities of college life.