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Christmas Gift-Giving with Less Green, Equal Joy

Christmas is upon us again: the gift-wrapping, cookie-baking, family-visiting, tree-decorating, snowman-building, light-hanging, carol-singing tidings of comfort and joy time. Your near-empty wallet, however, does little to make your spirits bright on a college student's budget. Do not let gift-giving obligation overtake your Christmas joy. After all, Christmas was not created for celebrating commercial and material things, despite how popular culture depicts it. Choosing thoughtful, yet inexpensive gifts for Christmas does not detract much from your wallet or from the joy and value of giving.

According to a survey conducted by Youth Trends, a strategic research and advisory firm, 16- to 24-year olds will spend about \$600 each on Christmas gifts for family and friends. This is a high average, so create a budget limit. If you have \$200 to spend, three good friends and five family members, that's \$25 per person. If you have more friends than you can count, one- to two-dollar items or a group gift exchange are good choices. For gift exchanges, you only have to buy one gift.

You do not have to spend a lot of money at mall shops. Instead, department stores like Target and Wal-Mart have a lot of nice gift items for only a few dollars each. The dollar store is a winner for college students on a tight budget. From picture frames, room décor and toys to kitchen utensils, auto care and hair accessories, dollar stores have something to please every gift recipient for only a buck each.

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There are always bargains, clearances and sales in retail stores, so take advantage of the discounted-item inventory.

Another way to save money on gifts is shopping online. Visit sites like Amazon.com, eBay.com and Overstock.com for lower-priced items. Do not forget to take shipping and handling charges into account or your purchase may end up being more expensive than you bargained for.

Get creative and make your own gifts. Handmade gifts are not only very personal, but quite cheap. If you are artistic and crafty, you are lucky. Draw or paint a winter wonderland for Mom. Compose a small piece on the piano for Grandpa. Build a bird feeder for Grandma. Make a photo collage for your family. Design personalized Christmas cards for everyone. The possibilities are endless.

If you are skilled at graphic design, create a styled photo using software like Adobe Photoshop. Get the photo developed and put it in a small frame or have the photo enlarged to give as a poster.

Amy Rose, a senior communication major, is knitting pot holders in her friends' favorite colors and making fudge for all her friends as Christmas gifts.

Shauna Quinn, a senior music major, has made her friends handmade ornaments and hand-knit Christmas trees. This year, Quinn is making little snowmen out of clay pots.

"Michael's craft store is the best place to go for ideas," Quinn said. "I love crafting and it's a cheaper way to give all my friends a little something."

Another homemade gift idea is mini stockings, which can be filled with candy.

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Take two pieces of red or green felt and trace a small stocking onto the felt. Using red, green or white yarn, stitch the two pieces of felt together, leaving the top open to stuff with candy.

Senior music education major Laura Leftwich has baked cookies and made little goodie-bags with candies for Christmas gifts. Leftwich said ornaments are relatively inexpensive from stores such as Target and Pier 1.

Mason alum, Christine Padua, has also given baked cookies as gifts, arranged nicely on a decorative plate that is reusable.

“I also like giving character mugs, like a snowman, Santa, or reindeer that I either put candy or hot tea/hot cocoa packages in,” Padua said.

Another inexpensive gift idea is a magazine subscription, ranging from \$10 to \$15 for a year’s subscription. Whether it is Sports Illustrated for your brother, Cosmopolitan for your girlfriend or Newsweek for your Dad, there is a magazine that suits everyone’s interests.

Another gift option is re-gifting. It is a holiday tradition we all practice, so there is no shame in doing so. A couple of no-no’s include re-gifting hand-me-downs, used items, partially-used gift cards, obscure software and boxed sets of no-brand bath products, to name a few. Also, keep track of who gave you what, so you do not give your best friend the book she gave you last year. Do not forget to actually re-wrap the gift in new, not ripped, unwrinkled gift wrap.

If you are at a loss for inexpensive gift ideas, Internet browsing is a great way to generate ideas. Browse a craft store or flip through books for inspiration. Follow this advice for gift ideas and you may have some extra green left over to spend on yourself at post-Christmas and New Year’s sales.