



2026 OCCASIONS REPORT

College Bound

The 2026 Occasions Survey indicates leaving for college celebrations might become slightly more common in the year ahead.

Thirteen percent of respondents said they were very or somewhat likely to have such an event in their own lives, up from 10% in the previous report, when 5% were very likely and 5% somewhat likely. Friends-and-family college departures saw a similar lift: 8% of respondents were very likely and 11% somewhat likely to celebrate one this year, compared with 7% and 8%, respectively, last year.

While the occasion itself is not surging, the likelihood of gifting home and housewares for college send-offs has risen sharply. In the 2026 survey, 17% of respondents were very likely and 21% somewhat likely to give a home and housewares gift, up from just 7% and 10%, respectively, a year ago. Bedroom products led at 40%, with organization/home décor at 40% and bathroom/personal care at 38%.

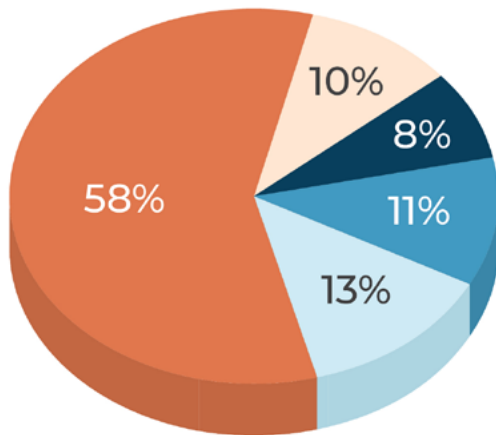
Expectedly, gift cards dominate gifting preferences for college departures. Nearly half of consumers (47%) said they would choose a gift card, compared to 30% who prefer a specific gift. That compares to 45% gift cards and 25% specific gifts a year earlier, as fewer respondents remain undecided about their approach.

Gen Z is most likely to anticipate a leaving for college event for themselves, with 11% very likely and 15% somewhat likely.

Gen Z widened its lead over Millennials in anticipating a friends-and-family college departure, rising to 14% very likely and 21% somewhat likely from 10%/13%, respectively, last year. Millennials followed at 11%/13%, up from 8%/10% in 2024.

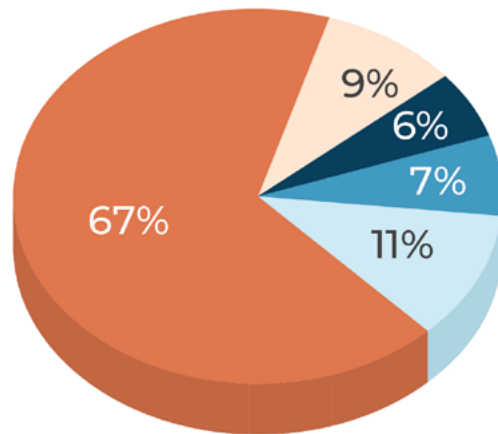


Likelihood of a Leaving for College Event Among Friends or Family in the Next 12 Months



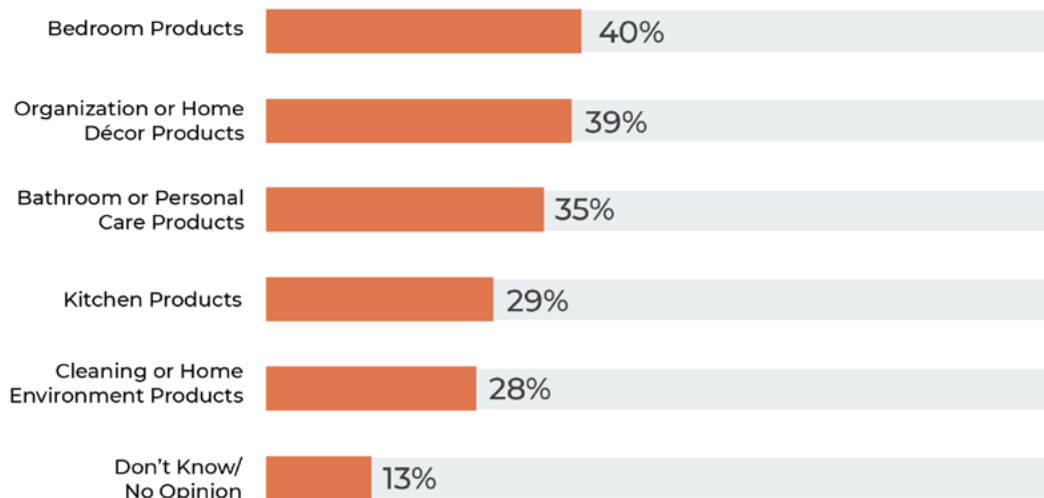
Very Likely Somewhat Likely Not too Likely
Not at all Likely Don't know/No Opinion

Likelihood of a Leaving for College Event for Oneself in the Next 12 Months



Very Likely Somewhat Likely Not too Likely
Not at all Likely Don't know/No Opinion

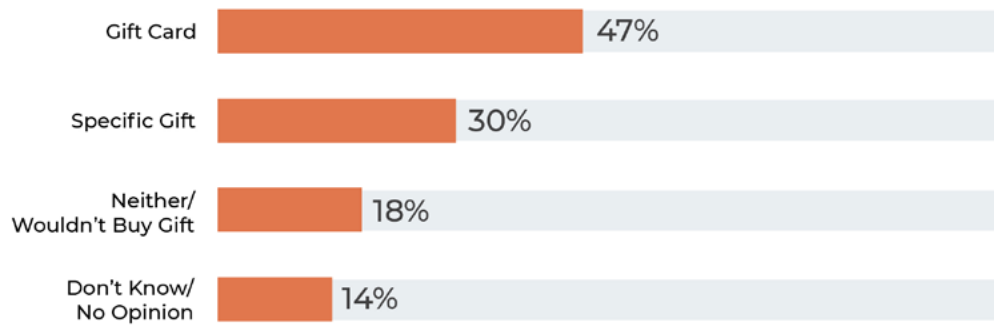
Home + Housewares Categories Likely To Be Purchased for a Leaving for College Event



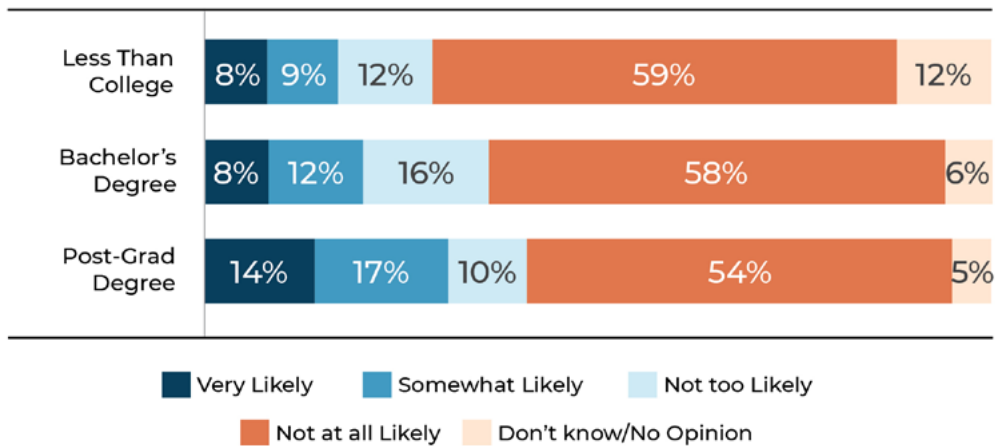
All income groups expect greater participation in friends-and-family college-departure events this year.



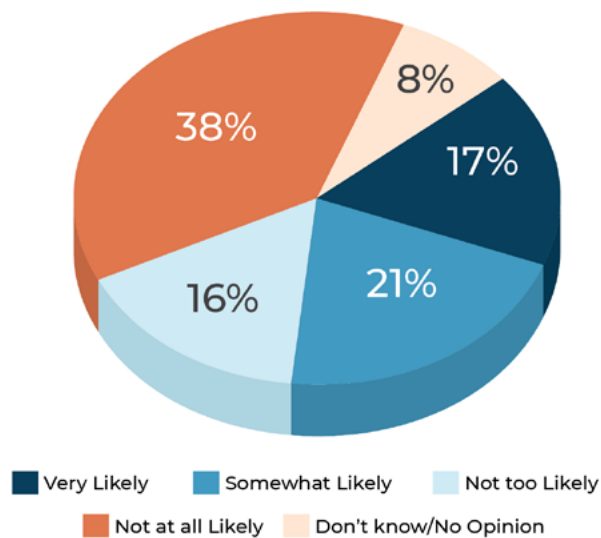
Preferred Types of Leaving for College Gifts



Likelihood of Attending a Leaving for College Event by Education Level



Likelihood of Purchasing a Home + Housewares Gift for a Leaving for College Event



Both non-college attendees and bachelor's-degree holders are five points higher than in last year's survey, but post-graduates saw the most significant increase: 14% very likely and 17% somewhat likely to attend a friends-and-family college send-off, up from 9% and 11%, respectively, a year ago.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Gift-givers for the leaving for college occasion tend to secure their home and housewares gifts in the summer. Still, a substantial proportion do so before and after the most common timeframe, which may complicate getting an item to the student. Not all gift-givers, mainly if they are geographically distant, will be at the occasions when most presents will be given. As such, online retailers such as Amazon have made it so that consumers can purchase and ship to wherever the student lives. However, that creates a timing issue, as the student already must be situated to receive it. Therefore, retailers with online operations and stores in college communities can find a more convenient solution in ship-to-store operations.

Some retailers with digital operations and many locations, including Target and Walmart, have year-round college assortments that can be searched online and the ability to receive a gift near where the student is living to be picked up when ready. The store pickup option can be attractive with an occasion not focused on a single day. Amazon also has pickup locations, but while students are likely to know that, gift-givers might not and can turn to stores where they typically use pickup themselves. Promoting pickup in all college-related engagements could be a good idea in such circumstances. When that isn't in the cards, the establishment and promotion of other means of connecting gifts and students may be worth consideration.

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