

Tips for College-Bound Computer Buyers

Here's a quick tour of features you'll want your campus machine to have and some you can overlook

Windows vs. Mac. This is a matter of preference. I use both regularly, and I'm not going to argue that one is inherently better than the other. Linux is also a viable alternative on campus, but if you're sophisticated enough to set up and run a Linux box, you don't need my advice.

Laptop vs. Desktop. I think students should strongly consider laptops. Although you'll pay less for equal computing power in a desktop, convenience is worth something and the space you save is precious in a cramped dorm room. In laptops, bigger is generally cheaper and if mobility is not terribly important to you, consider one of the desktop replacement laptops that offer 15-in. or larger displays. Many of the new, big laptops offer widescreen displays that are ideal for watching movies or working with more than one document at a time.

Desktops survive at the top and bottom of the line. If you are on a very tight budget, you can get a serviceable desktop for \$400. At the very high end desktops still outperform the hottest laptops, a consideration for dedicated gamers. And you can put in bigger hard drives and more of them if you are an avid collector of music and other digital entertainment content. One cautionary note: Theft, unfortunately, is endemic in college housing, and laptops make tempting targets. If you go with a laptop, get a Kensington lock -- and use it.

Specifications. Unless you have some particularly intense need, any processor being sold today will be more than adequate. Don't spend a lot of money for power you don't need. The easiest and cheapest way to increase performance is by adding memory: Don't settle for less than 256 MB for either Windows or Mac. Get the biggest hard drive you can, at least 80 GB in a desktop, 30 GB in a laptop.

A CD writer is a good choice, and a DVD recorder is worth considering (either DVD-RW or DVD+RW; it makes little difference.) But you can probably get by without a floppy drive unless you have old disks that you need to read.

Displays. Tiny laptops are cute, but that small display will get old fast. Try to get one with at least a 14-inch screen, or plan on using an external monitor. Unless budget constraints are absolutely critical, a flat-panel display is a better choice for a desktop display than a CRT. You can get a 15-inch LCD display with 1,024x768-pixel resolution for less than \$300 and a 1,280x1,024-pixel 17-inch for under \$500.

While CRT monitors of equivalent viewable display size and quality remain somewhat cheaper, LCD monitors take up far less space and throw off much less heat. And lugging a 19-inch CRT up three flights of stairs to a dorm room is an experience you'll never want to repeat.

Networks.

A port for a wired Ethernet connection is pretty much standard on all computers today; don't even consider a product without it. But wireless Ethernet (or Wi-Fi) is becoming just as important, as campuses install widespread wireless networks. Built-in Wi-Fi is much more convenient and often gives performance superior to add-in cards, so it is well worth making sure that your laptop is wireless. (Some low-end Apple models require adding an AirPort card; this is equivalent to built-in Wi-Fi and will work fine.)

Don't be confused by the profusion of "flavors" of wireless Ethernet being offered. Nearly any campus network you will run into will run on the oldest, 802.11b standard. The new, and faster 802.11g is completely compatible with 802.11b. 802.11a, also a newer, faster standard, does not

have built-in compatibility but all the notebooks I have seen with 802.11a have dual radios that also support 802.11b—and work automatically to select the fastest network available.

Dial-up modems are standard on most computers. If you are lucky, you will rarely, if ever, use it.

Operating Systems. Not much choice here. All new Macs ship with OS X loaded. All Windows computers now ship with either Windows XP Home or Windows XP Professional. Not much differentiates the two versions of Win XP. XP Pro offers more capable networking, but you'll have to decide if it is worth the extra \$100 or so.

Software. It's simple: Don't buy any that you don't absolutely need right now. The publishers of big and expensive software packages (Microsoft, Adobe, Autocad, Wolfram Research, Waterloo Maple, Macromedia) offer "academic editions" at a fraction of the retail price. These are generally identical to the retail packages but are restricted to student use by license and are available only at campus bookstores to students with a school ID.

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