



## Resources

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### Buying a Computer for College

*Bridget Kulla*

A computer for college is essential but can add a hefty expense to your budget, so choose wisely. Consider these points when computer shopping:

#### Desktop or Laptop?

Laptops are more portable and since many campuses and public areas provide wireless Internet service, you won't be limited to your dorm room to work. If your courses will involve travel or fieldwork, a lightweight laptop makes sense.

Desktops are less fragile and usually more affordable than laptops. Their hardware can also be updated more easily. If your dorm room is cramped, don't forget that desktops take up more space.

Another alternative is a desktop-replacement laptop. Desktop-replacement laptops have wider screens and more features than typical laptops, but they also weigh more and are consequently less portable than smaller laptops.

#### PC or Mac?

When deciding whether to get a Mac or PC, opt for the system you are more comfortable using. If you're used to working on a PC, stick with a PC for college. Most schools are compatible with both systems. "Make sure you research the college, what the IT requirements are, before you even start deciding if you want Mac or PC" says Barbara Pliska, manager of the computer store at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

#### What to Look for in a Computer for School

Get familiar with the components of computers before shopping. Check with your college's technology services to learn about any system or software requirements they may have.

#### Components:

- **Processor:** The processor is your computer's brain. Also known as the Central Processing Unit (CPU), it controls how fast and smoothly your computer runs. Computers use a variety of processor types. Processor speed is measured in megahertz (MHz) or gigahertz (GHz). Most new computers have a minimum of a 1.25 GHz processor. Check with your school to find out which processor works best with their system.
- **Memory:** Random Access Memory (RAM) is a temporary storage area for data currently in use. It allows multiple programs to run simultaneously without slowing down your system. The more RAM you have, the faster your computer will run. The amount of RAM is measured in gigabytes (GB) or megabytes (MB). It is a good idea to get a computer with at least 512 MB of RAM. Consider getting more RAM if you will be using your computer for multimedia purposes, like watching movies and downloading music. If you plan on having your computer for a long time, look for a computer with easy-to-access memory slots that will allow you to upgrade your memory.
- **Hard Drive:** The hard drive provides permanent storage for your computer. Look for computers with at least 20 GB of hard drive space.
- **Ethernet Card:** An Ethernet card allows your computer to communicate across the campus network. Most PCs and all Macs are currently manufactured with built-in Ethernet cards. Older computers may need to have an Ethernet card installed. You will need an Ethernet cable to connect your card to the network jack. New computers typically do not come with an Ethernet cable so expect to purchase one.
- **Wireless Access:** An increasing number of campuses have wireless access areas. To access wireless networks, you need a wireless network interface card. New computers come equipped with wireless cards and older computers can have them installed. Keep in mind, you will still need to have an Ethernet card at most schools even if you have a wireless card.
- **Software:** The software you need will vary by school and program. Whether you get a PC or Mac, expect to have Microsoft Office XP, which includes Excel, Word and PowerPoint. Many schools

prefer students to have the Professional edition of Microsoft Office instead of the Home edition that is usually included with new computers. Make sure you make this distinction when purchasing your computer.

It is also important to protect your computer from viruses. Some schools provide students with anti-virus programs like Norton AntiVirus, but definitely install an anti-virus program if your school does not provide one.

#### Learn More

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- PC Magazine reviews and tests computers and software.

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