

## ADVICE TO STUDENTS: PACK A MAC

Apple's software has improved, but Windows has been stuck in a rut

**Technology & You** - By Stephen H. Wildstrom  
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In a few months, nearly 3 million freshmen will head off to college. Included in the gear most of them lug along will be a computer, often brand new. This year I have some advice for the college-bound: Unless you have a compelling reason not to go with a Mac, an Apple laptop or desktop offers the best combination of features, ease of use, and value.

While I have been a Mac fan for years, I have never felt strongly enough to make the Mac a default recommendation. But things have changed. Mac software, both the OS X operating system and the applications such as iPhoto and GarageBand bundled with it, have gotten steadily better, while Windows seems stuck in a rut.

Meanwhile, new Mac hardware based on Intel ([INTC](#)) processors has erased the performance gap between Macs and products from Hewlett-Packard ([HP](#)), Dell ([DELL](#)), and others in the Windows camp. The move to Intel also lets Macs run most Windows programs, either by rebooting using Apple's ([AAPL](#)) Boot Camp software, or right on the Mac desktop using Parallels Workstation, a program I described in my May 1 column.

Students who know about Windows Vista, the first major improvement in Windows in five years, might be inclined to stick with PCs. But Vista, which won't be out until next year, may not do much more than catch up to OS X. And before Vista ships, Apple plans to release a new version of OS X called Leopard that will likely raise the bar even higher.

**DORM DWELLER.** Apple, of course, offers a much more limited range of hardware than Windows vendors do. It has just three laptop and two desktop lines, excluding the professionally oriented Power Mac workstations. In laptops, which most students probably prefer, there's the 13-in. widescreen MacBook starting at \$1,099, and the 15.4-in. and 17-in. widescreen MacBook Pros, starting at \$1,999 and \$2,799, respectively. In each case, even the base models are pretty well loaded; the one step I recommend, if you are looking at a model with just 512 megabytes of memory, is to increase that to 1 gigabyte.

Apple offers two unique desktop designs, either of which is better suited to the cramped confines of a dorm room than a Windows desktop. At the low end is the very compact Mac mini, which comes without a keyboard or a screen and is available for either \$599 or \$799. The extra \$200 buys you the Intel Core Duo processor, which is well worth the money. The other design option is the elegant all-in-one iMac with a 17-in. (\$1,299) or 20-in. (\$1,699) flat-panel display.

I realize that there are a lot of people who prefer Windows—it does claim more than 95% of the market. And there are two classes of buyers for whom it is a better choice. If the budget is really tight, you can buy a serviceable Windows laptop or desktop for less than the cheapest Apple products. And serious gamers will want the power of a high-end Windows desktop.

**ON-SITE SERVICE.** Windows laptops come in various shapes and sizes. While portability is important, you will probably be happiest with at least a 14-in. display—nearly all are now widescreens—unless you plan to use an external desktop monitor. Base your choice on features and price, not brand. And find out if your school has a deal with a manufacturer. Going with that may get you a better price, and more important, better service. For example, some schools are set up to provide on-site service for the brand they support.

Windows desktops offer lots of choices in processors, graphics cards, and other features, but they almost all come in one of two mini-tower alternatives: big and slightly smaller. You'll probably want a 17-in. flat-panel monitor, for \$200 and up. (For more technical details and recommendations, see "[Online Extras](#)").

Whether you go with Mac or Windows, today you will get a lot more computer for your money than ever before. And if you can avoid the cheapest systems, you'll be buying a laptop or desktop that will serve until the last tuition payment is made.

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