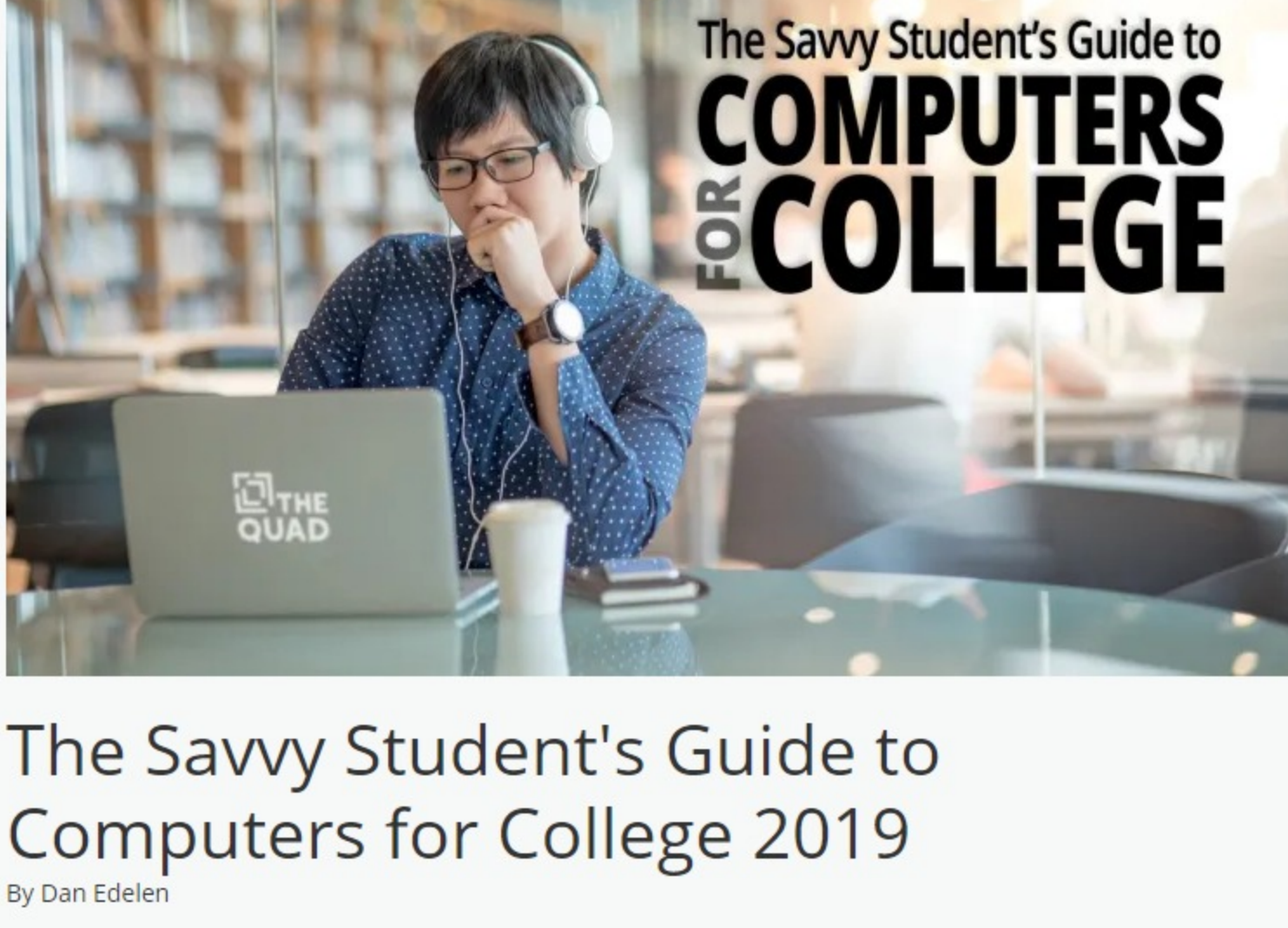




The Savvy Student's Guide to Computers for College 2019

By Dan Edeken

What's the most helpful item an intrepid college student can receive — no matter the time of the year — than the one item that makes an online education possible?

The right computer.

Truth: You need the right computer to do online college right. If you're attending online to escape the restrictions of the typical campus classroom, escaping the typical office is of equal importance. So forget a desktop computer. You want a notebook / laptop. That goes for on-campus use too.

No library computers. No computer lab computers. No, you want...strike that, *you need* your own computer. We're here to help.

TheBestSchools.org ranks colleges, universities, schools, and degree programs. We excel at it. But in interest of full disclosure, we don't have a computer hardware lab staffed with dedicated tech gurus testing the latest gear. That said, we're not noobs either. The author of this article worked for Apple in competitive hardware and software analysis and was also a network admin for NASA. So, we've got some cred when it comes to talking tech.

In addition, we're doing you a solid by going beyond the usual "buyer's guide" list of "random computers with decent reviews at other tech sites." We didn't mashup computer review sites' data or make choices based on affiliate links. Instead, we talked to campus bookstore sales techs and college IT departments across the country. They know what colleges demand in system requirements. They know what people are buying and when. They understand costs, considerations, and other important trends. And while what we lay out here is what's happening right now in college computing, we're not going to shove a bunch of links at you for equipment that was here today and gone tomorrow. Specific computer models and configurations change too often. We'll instead provide common sense info and suggest computers that have been evergreen and commonly available.

A caveat about prices: within weeks of a maker setting an MSRP, it changes it. Street prices also fluctuate like mad. Any prices quoted here are ballpark figures subject to change — often radical change. And know that any configuration changes to RAM, disk storage, processor class, etc., are going to raise or lower the price, even within the same model.

So, let's set the stage. This is reality...

Colleges recommend certain computers — heed them

Buying a computer that doesn't measure up to the needs of your classes is an *epic fail*. Before you decide on a computer, check with the department of your intended major to find out what systems the faculty or IT service recommend for your general course of study. A film student will need a different computer with more powerful graphics capability than will a history student. Many colleges list minimal system standards per various disciplines. Don't feel you must buy more computer than you need, but *NEVER* buy less!

Apple dominates

At every college we contacted, Apple MacBook Pro and MacBook Air together comprised anywhere from 60% to 100% of the notebook computers students purchased. The average split was close to 80% Apple and 20% percent PCs running Windows. Of the latter, Dell and Lenovo own the strongest presence in higher ed.



Students buy more computers at the campus bookstores

Why? Because the bookstores partner with computer makers to offer educational and seasonal discounts. Often steep discounts. And 10% or more off the cheapest street prices can translate into \$100 or more in savings. As a result, August at many college bookstores is a frenzy of computer sales. For new students, it's also one less item to pack for that first trip to campus.

Online versions of the college bookstore exist

For students off campus or who wish to buy ahead of the August crush, most colleges have an online version of their bookstore, often run by eFollett.com or Barnes & Noble College and branded for that school. The same educational discounts apply. These online stores will most likely ship equipment or can hold it for you at the physical store. In addition, it's possible to buy online from the educational departments of [Apple](#) and [Dell](#).

Extended warranties matter

One's entire academic life seems to revolve around a computer. When that source of your academic being doesn't work, you're not just not doing your college work, you're losing your mind trying to get your computer fixed yesterday. Makers rely on that panic. Apple's standard warranty is about the same as some toasters. For this reason, Apple's extended warranty, [AppleCare+](#), is almost a must-buy, extending a notebook warranty to three years, offering instant replacement for an unfixable problem, and even providing some accidental damage coverage. At student rates, it does add another \$229 to the cost. Dell and Lenovo have similar extended warranty options.

Expect to pay \$1,500 minimum

As noted, Apple dominates, and Apple notebooks aren't cheap. For that reason, students buy the lower-priced MacBook Pro and MacBook Air models with the 13-inch screens. For Windows-based PCs, students tend to stay in that same price range as the Apple units, but the screen size jumps to 15 inches and a few of the other hardware components — SSDs (solid state drives), ports, RAM, and such — get a capacity or performance boost. By the time you factor in accessories and an extended warranty, you're at the \$1,500-mark or more.

Notebook Computers 101

Speaking generally, you will need the following components and specs in most any computer you consider:

- CPU:**
Intel® Core™ i5 Seventh-Generation Processor (better: Intel® Core™ i7 Eighth-Generation Processor)
- Graphics Chipset (GPU):**
Varies
- RAM:**
8GB (better: 12GB to 16 GB)
- SSD Drive:**
128GB (better: 256GB or 512GB)
- Screen:**
13-inch (better: 15-inch or larger)
- Wi-Fi:**
802.11n (better: 802.11ac and dual band)
- USB Ports:**
USB-A or USB-C or Thunderbolt (better: more than one and different types)
- Screen Ports:**
HDMI or DisplayPort (better: more than one and different types)
- Bluetooth:**
Yes
- Webcam:**
Yes

Intel doesn't make life easier by having several types of processors with multiple speeds and capabilities within those types. Simply stated, you want at least a quad-core processor, meaning newer i5 and i7 processors. The four digit number that is often listed after the i5 or i7 gives you an idea what generation the chip is, how fast it is compared against others of its class, and other performance info. In general, the higher the number, the better. Intel's latest i5, i7, and i9 processors are into the ninth generation (9000-series) now and come with eight cores of processing power. Unless you're a hardcore gaming fan with a trust fund to burn, that's probably overkill. For more on Intel's processors, [see its site](#). If you're looking in the lower price ranges, you may also encounter Windows-based laptops with [AMD's Ryzen™](#) and [Athlon™](#) processors, which can be a tad cheaper than Intel's.

Graphics chipsets are even more cryptic than computer processors. As with most things, they scale features and performance with price. A more powerful chipset will obviously process graphic info faster and at higher frame rates, but the truth is, unless you're majoring in something like art, design, film, engineering, architecture, or game development, you won't need to spend too much time worrying over graphic chipsets. In most cases, you won't find a computer with a speedy CPU paired with an anemic GPU anyway. So, for most uses, don't sweat this one. Rule of thumb: if it has an nVidia GeForce or AMD Radeon Pro chipset, it's typically better than a standard Intel built-in graphics chipset.

Today, most computers use a **solid-state drive (SSD)**, which is like a higher-storage, built-in flash drive. In theory, it better protects and accesses stored data because it has no moving parts, like old hard disk drives did. Computers with SSDs boot faster, run cooler and quieter, and are simply superior in durability and performance. The trade off is that SSDs cost more and therefore tend to have smaller capacities than their older hard drive cousins. In an age of cloud computing (Google Drive, OneDrive, Dropbox, etc.), more of us store our data in the cloud, so more info is offloaded from your local computer to remote storage, which makes a smaller SSD less of an issue. That noted, you may need to lean larger if you're doing film editing, CAD work, or something similar that demands managing huge data files.

It's nice to have an Ethernet port for connecting by cable to a wired computer network if Wi-Fi is spotty. Several USB ports are helpful if you're connecting to a flash drive and a number of wired peripherals such as a separate keyboard, an old printer, or a wired mouse. USB-C is the dominant format of USB now, but having an older USB-A port or two is nice for backward compatibility.

What's no longer an essential is a CD-ROM, DVD-ROM, or Blu-Ray optical drive, since they've given way to Wi-Fi and streaming over fast networks. That said, check with your course departments at the college you'll attend to ensure no one is demanding you use an optical drive for anything.

Online college students take note

Most on-campus students don't use a second monitor, but if you're an online student who is working most often from a home office, having a second monitor attached to your notebook with its existing screen is easier on the eyes and gives more display space to manage windows. This is especially helpful if you want to [play a game](#) take notes on one screen and watch an online class in another.

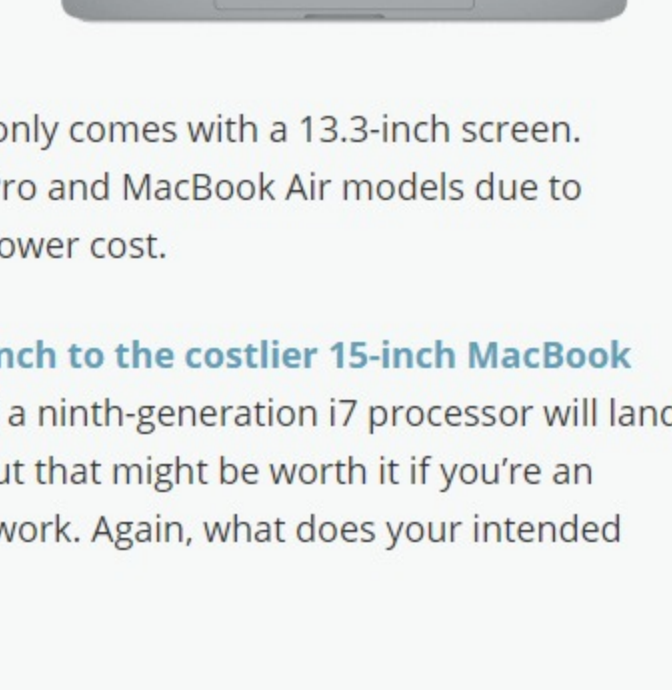
Of course, you'll need a webcam for interacting online, but almost all notebook computers today have one. Also, you may need to pay more attention to graphics chipsets since webinars and online video will become a way of life. A better graphic chipset will ensure smoother video playback and no skipped frames right as your prof is divulging the secrets of the universe.

Conformity is your friend

Sure, you have your own trendsetting style. But save it for something other than your choice of computer. Having the same make and model of computer as your classmates is wise. When your screen starts flashing on and off for no reason at 1 a.m. on the eve of your semester project deadline, it's more likely somebody in your dorm or an online classmate will have dealt previously with that problem if they own that same computer. Computers can be quirky. It's a lot easier to address known oddities of a common make and model than a weird flake-out of an esoteric machine no one else has heard of. If you want to make a style statement, do so with stickers or a notebook skin. Otherwise, consider sticking with what everyone else is buying.

"We are the Borg. Resistance is futile..."

For that reason, if your college is like most others, you're likely better off with a 13-inch Apple MacBook Pro or MacBook Air. The four MacBook Pro models in the commonly purchased 13.3-inch screen have 8GB of RAM; a 128GB, 256GB, or 512GB SSD; a seventh- or eighth-generation Intel Core i5 processor; and cost between \$1,250 and \$1,900 (depending on the model). The highly portable [MacBook Air](#) runs about \$850 to \$1,350 depending on which size SSD is chosen. 128GB or 256GB, has a slightly weaker processor than the MacBook Pro, and only comes with a 13.3-inch screen. Students opt for the 13-inch screen MacBook Pro and MacBook Air models due to smaller size and weight for portability and for lower cost.



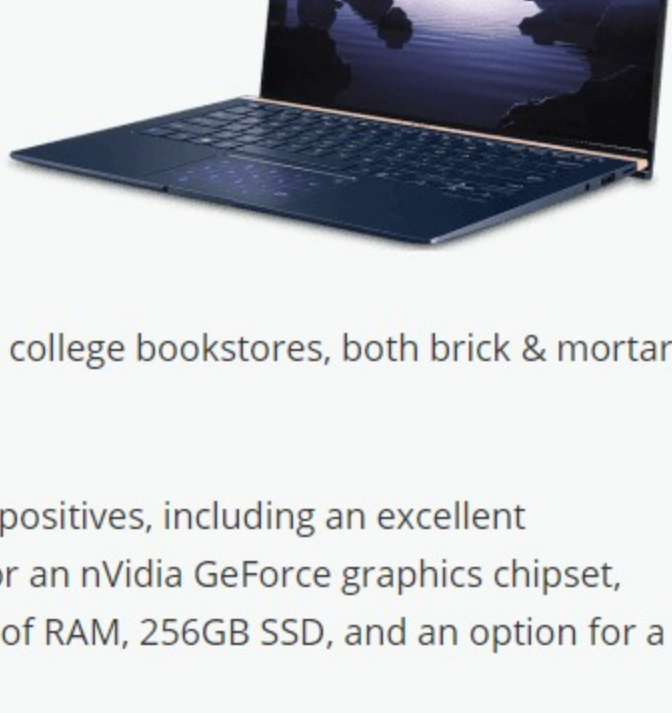
To jump up from the above [MacBook Pro 13-inch](#) to the costlier 15-inch MacBook Pro with 16GB RAM, 256GB or 512GB SSD, and a ninth-generation i7 processor will land you in the \$2,250 and up range. Yeah, whoa. But that might be worth it if you're an engineering student or doing a lot of graphics work. Again, what does your intended department recommend?

Apple swings both ways...not that there's anything wrong with that

One other *HUGE* consideration with Apple: your parents — bless their hearts — may not believe it, but all recent Apple computers can run Windows through a dual-boot process. In fact, Apple MacBook Pros often run Windows better than their PC hardware counterparts do. If you really want the best of both worlds, it's an important consideration and may render moot the choice between Apple hardware and traditional Windows-based PC hardware.

\$%^# Apple!

If the mere sight of that chunk-missing fruit logo makes you dry heave, then say hello to the ranks of the lightly oppressed minority on campus. Welcome, PC fan. At most campuses, you'll find Dell and Lenovo offer educational discounts on certain models. For a little less than the MacBook Pro 13-inch with the 128GB SSD, you could get into the popular [Dell Inspiron 15 7000 Touch](#), which gives you 16GB of RAM, a 512GB SSD, a 15.6-inch high-def touch screen, an eighth-generation Intel Core i7 processor, and an nVidia GeForce graphics chipset — a powerful combo. (Yeah, you're paying for that Apple logo.) Dell's answer to AppleCare+, called ProSupport Plus, offers similar warranty benefits, including for accidents, and costs about \$260 (at the time of writing) for three years. The [Dell XPS 13](#) is just under \$1,000 with an eighth-generation i5 processor, and it tops many reviews.



If you'd like your computer to serve as a tablet also, the [Lenovo Yoga C930 2-in-1](#) has been well-reviewed and is priced similar to the XPS 13. Lenovo's respected [ThinkPad](#) (a brand purchased from IBM, known for durability and outstanding keyboards) and its less pricey sibling series, the [IdeaPad](#), are also seen around campus and found in many college bookstores.

Chromebooks are cheap, but...

You may be familiar with a Chromebook because you chose one in high school. Chromebooks from various manufacturers run Google's Chrome OS and are tempting because they can be the least expensive laptops. You can buy a new one for under \$350. If you do nothing but work in Google's Chrome browser or use Google Docs, send email, or do web-based work, you're set. A browser-based version of Microsoft Office exists now too.

The problem with Chromebooks? One professor assigns you work using a Windows or Apple OS application and you're toast. (A plan to allow [Windows 10 to run on Chromebooks was promised, but it's dead now](#).) Chromebooks run a limited number of special applications made just for Chromebooks; they don't play well with apps written for anything else. And many applications you may need for college work are not available for Chrome OS. Even if your college offers a Chromebook as a recommended option, Chrome OS still limits you. For instance, if you want to chillax and game, your favorite PC and Mac games won't run on a Chromebook, and trying to get [Steam](#) to run on a Chromebook is a chore. The processors in Chromebooks also tend to be on the weaker side. Better to spend a little more and get a Windows PC or a Mac running Apple OS. We hesitate to recommend any Chromebooks because the specs vary too much from what you might need.

If your heart and wallet are set on a Chromebook, then absolutely check your college's computer specifications for your major to see if a Chromebook will work, and cross-check that against top-rated Chromebooks at [PC Magazine](#) or [Laptop Magazine](#).

Linux, iOS, and Android: just say no

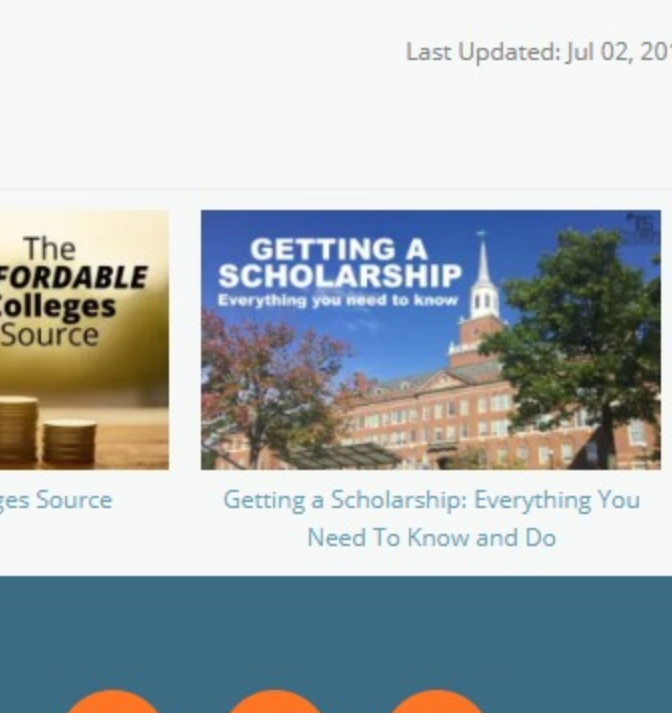
For now, forget tablets that run iOS (iPad) and Android. One day they may be approved to handle all your college work, but for now, not really. As for the Linux OS, if you're running your computer in a dual boot that uses either Windows or Mac OS, as the primary OS with Linux as the secondary OS, then OK. But not Linux by itself. The reality is that you may be able to do 75% percent of your college work on something that isn't Windows or Apple OS, but you need 100%.

Exceptions to the college computer-buying rules

No matter what recommendations you may make, some oddball need for a computer that's way out there exists. Why? Because as many oddball majors exist as there are students. Hey, you're the one who picked animal husbandry, and your Apple MacBook Air just got trampled by a randy longhorn.

If you're studying digital game design or virtual/augmented reality, or plan to play on an eSports team, you may need outrageous power. A computer with a six- or even eight-core ninth-generation Intel i7 processor, and an nVidia GeForce GTX 1070 graphic chipset or higher may be required. PC brands such as [Alienware](#), [MSI](#), [ASUS ROG](#), [Gigabyte](#), [AORUS](#), [HP Omen](#), and others in the gaming sector will meet the challenge, but they'll also drain your wallet of as much as \$3,500 or more (again, you picked the major, not us). Alienware is made by Dell, and some college bookstores carry that brand, along with an educational discount and Dell's extended warranty. The higher-end MacBook Pro models with i7 processors and AMD Radeon chipsets may work as well.

If you must be outside in bright sunlight, rain, snow, or some other "what am I doing with my life?" situation such as breeding randy longhorns, you may need a virtually bombproof [Panasonic Toughbook](#) or a [Dell Latitude Rugged or Rugged Extreme](#). Again, \$\$\$\$\$, but if you must count on your computer no matter where it travels with you, it will likely still be kicking even after that longhorn has cooled his hooves.



A few colleges may have agreements with [Dell to stock their Latitude models](#), which are ubiquitous business notebooks made to take a lot of punishment and still perform reliably. It's not billed as a consumer model, and it's harder to find. If you like to have a second monitor, a separate keyboard, and a host of items plugged into your computer, the Latitude has a dock (*aka*: port replicator) available, which makes going from mobile to something akin to a desktop setup a breeze: just pop in or out and go.

Once again, with any esoteric course of study, absolutely check with the department first. If you'll need something extraordinary, someone there will let you know.

Conclusion

In short, when it comes to buying a computer, just like the Iron Giant, "You choose." But in truth, much of what you'll need is likely chosen for you by the systems your college recommends. And that's not a bad thing. It ensures you get the system that will meet your needs and deliver the experience demanded from your classes. College is hard enough. Get the right computer, and that's one less thing to fret about.

Whatever you do buy, enjoy!

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