

Getting wired for college

Compaq Armada 1510DM laptop is loaded with features helpful to students / **Simson Garfinkel**

G OING OFF TO college? If so, then you (or your folks) are probably thinking about buying some sort of computer for word processing, crunching homework assignments, balancing your checkbook, and reading e-mail. (You're not supposed to have time for computer games.) Now the big question: What to get?

For anybody going off to college for the first time, my advice is simple: Wait. Most colleges provide computers, Internet access, e-mail, and even printers for students: use. Not only is your tuition already paying for these systems, but you are also paying to upgrade them, back up their data, and fix them when they break. If you can use your college's computers, you'll save money and make friends.

Unfortunately, most colleges are quite strapped for money these days, and computers are expensive. If you depend on your college's computer, you might find yourself waiting in long lines to get in front of a keyboard — particularly at the end of the semester, when you need to be working most. For that reason, many students end up buying their own machines.

If you want to buy a Mac, then buy a Mac. Macs are very popular in higher education, and many

universities sell them on campus at substantial discount. But before you part with your money, call a few of the larger mail-order companies such as Mac Connection (800-334-4444), Mac Warehouse (800-255-6227), or Mac Zone (800-248-0800), to see if they can match or beat the price. You'll save sales tax and still qualify for on-campus service at the authorized Apple service center.

Many if not most of you, though, will be buying a PC. One reason is choice. There are more models and prices to choose from and you can run either Windows 95 or Windows NT. You can also run Linux, a free UNIX operating system that's very popular among students in science and engineering departments. And in a few months, you'll also be able to run the Be operating system that I wrote about a few weeks ago.

The next big choice is whether to buy a laptop or a desktop machine. Desktop systems are generally cheaper and easier to upgrade or expand. Laptops have the huge advantage that you can take them to class, to lab, or to the library. On the other hand, laptops are easier to steal — and there has been a rash of laptop thefts on campuses in recent years.

For the past month, I've been testing the Compaq Armada 1510DM laptop computer — a low-cost machine that has a lot going

for the typical student. To make things even better, Compaq just cut the prices of the Armada 1500 family, making the systems more affordable. Even if you don't want to buy this laptop, you can use its ample features as a checklist to compare against other makes and models.

The Armada 1510 comes with a full inventory of multimedia hardware. There's a CD-ROM drive, which is vital these days for installing software, a 3.5-inch floppy drive, a 1 gigabyte hard drive, and an 800x600 pixel screen. There is a touch pad, which I find preferable to either a track ball (which gets dirty) or a pointing stick (which gives me shoulder pains). There are jacks for a microphone and a headset, which make it easy to listen to an audio CD while you are hacking on your history homework. There's also a built-in 33.6 modem, although if you are in a dorm room, you'll probably be accessing the Internet with an ethernet card (not included).

The Armada has a built-in AC adapter, so you don't have to carry one of those bulky bricks with you to the library. You can slide out the floppy drive and slide in a spare battery, giving you four hours of power when running Windows NT and up to six hours when running Windows 95. And there's a low-cost docking station available that includes an ethernet adapter and turns your laptop into a desktop machine.

On the minus side, the Armada doesn't automatically go to sleep when you close the lid — I've often run down the battery by forgetting to hit the big sleep button at the top of the keyboard. The system weighs nearly 8 pounds, which is quite a lot to lug around every day. It lacks those little folding doors on the PC-card slots, making it all too easy to get dirt inside. And to save a few pennies, Compaq doesn't ship the system with any CD-ROMs or floppy disks that would let you restore your operating system in the event of a disaster. Instead, you have to call the company's "fulfillment hotline" and ask them to ship the disks out to you separately. Fortunately, there is no charge.

The Armada lacks bundled software that's included with Compaq's Presario series. This should be fine with most students, since many universities have site licenses for popular programs and their own software packs that students can load up for free.

But the worst part about the 1510DM is the STN screen. The colors are washed out, it's nearly impossible to read the screen in a brightly lit room, and I am forever losing track of my mouse cursor. Of course, the system is available with a fabulous 12.1-inch TFT color display, but that costs nearly \$1,000 more. Most students will probably skimp on the screen and instead buy a 15-inch video monitor (there is an external video jack on the back).

When you are buying a PC, one of the most important things is to get a lot of memory. If you have less than 32MB, you'll find yourself waiting whenever you switch between applications. Unfortunately, laptop memory is two to three times more expensive than desktop memory, which leads many people to cut themselves short. Do yourself a favor: Don't.

Finally, if you buy a laptop for school, be sure to get a service contract before your warranty runs out. You'll be glad you did.

Compaq's Armada 1510DM is priced at \$1,799 for the base configuration, and \$2,999 for the 1530DM with the TFT screen. The truly budget-minded should look at Compaq's Armada 4100, now priced at \$999 for an 8MB, 100MHZ Pentium system.

Technology writer Simson Garfinkel can be reached at plugged-in@simson.net.

