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from the October 26, 1998 edition

## As a College Cost, It Computes

James Turner

**BOSTON**— When college students call home these days, the plea is as likely to be "send computer" as "send money."

Fortunately, parents no longer need a second mortgage to keep the kids wired.

Computer prices have never been lower. About \$700, these days, buys a system that 18 months ago was the latest rage in high technology.

And for about \$1,300, you can find full-to-the-gills systems with every bell and whistle a college kid could desire. But the right system at the right price requires some research.

A nationwide vendor like Gateway or Dell may seem tempting, but you pay for the privilege. We went onto Dell's Web site ([www.dell.com](http://www.dell.com)) and configured a system that was loaded (see story, right for translations): 350 Mhz Pentium II CPU, 6.4-gigabyte (GB) hard drive, 128 megabytes (MB) of RAM, 17-inch monitor, ATI 8MB 3D AGP Graphics video card, DVD-ROM, 56K modem, Yamaha XG 64V Wavetable Integrated Sound card, Harmon/Kardon speakers, Windows98, and Microsoft Office. Total price: \$2,058.

Going to a discount mail-order house, a similar system (8.4GB drive, Intel i740 3D graphics acceleration AGP card with 8MB, Soundblaster compatible sound card) cost \$1,379 and could probably be found for less.

The major differences: a three-year warranty from Dell versus one year from the mail-order firm, and Dell bundles in Microsoft Office software, with some of the most popular business programs.

Even so, it's hard to justify an extra \$650 or so, especially if the machine is headed for campus.

So if you're willing to check your local stores and shop some of the mail-order Web sites, you can do better.

For \$700, you'll get a "house brand," assembled by the vendor with components culled from various manufacturers.

They work fine, but don't expect a recognizable nameplate on the front.

Instead of an Intel computer chip, for example, you'll probably find one from Cyrix or Advanced Micro Devices (AMD). They cost less, in part, because those companies don't pay big bucks for TV advertising campaigns.

We put together a system for about \$700 that included a Cyrix M2 200MX computer chip tied to an adequate level of memory: 32MB of RAM and 2.1GB hard drive. Also - 32X CD-ROM drive, sound card, speakers, keyboard, mouse, video board, 56K modem (for that all-important Internet and e-mail connection), Windows98, and 14-inch monitor.

Two years ago, a system this powerful would have gone to a corporate chief executive for big bucks. Now,

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it's a low-end, low-budget system, but more than enough for the typical student.

Bump the price to around \$1,300, and you get a faster, big-brand chip (the Intel 350 Mhz Pentium II) plus a warehouse full of memory - 128MB of RAM and a hard drive with 8GB. It also includes an 8MB 3D video board, Soundblaster AWE64 sound card, 32X CD-ROM, a bigger monitor (17 inches), and a 56K modem. Add Windows98 for another \$90.

For Apple aficionados, the real bargain may be the company's new iMac. Same price range as our high-end system (including a 15-inch monitor but not a floppy disk drive) and in the same range of performance and features.

A good, color ink-jet printer for any of these systems, including the iMac, runs \$150 or less for name brands such as Epson and HP.

To find these bargains, you'll need to find the good hunting grounds. You can start with the comparative shopping sites on the Web (see list, above).

These sites let you do head-to-head shopping comparisons among dozens of mail-order firms, and can help you quickly find the right price.

Your local computer store, whether independent or one of the big chains, may also offer some good deals. Don't be afraid to play one dealer off against another. They're often willing to bargain just to get your business.

#### THE 'WHAT' AND 'WHERE' OF A CHEAP COMPUTER

When comparing features on computers, you've got to know the jargon, which can seem dense but untangles easily.

The heart of the system is the CPU (central processing unit), and most systems use an Intel Pentium CPU or a clone made by Cyrix, AMD, or IBM.

The first item to consider is CPU speed, measured by a number (166, 200, 300, etc.). Higher means faster. So a 300Mhz (megahertz) Pentium moves twice as fast as a 150Mhz Pentium.

Next comes memory. Realistically, Windows95 and 98 are sluggish with less than 32MB of RAM. Fortunately, memory is cheap.

You'll also need a hard drive. Price differences for 3, 5, and 6GB drives are minimal, so go for at least 5GB. You'll need it eventually.

Perhaps most difficult is selecting a video card. Terms like 3D, AGP, and accelerated have different meanings for different cardmakers. Look for a card with at least 4MB of memory, and ask the dealer to help select a card.

You need a CD-ROM drive, since most software comes on CD. The speed (24x, 30x) refers to how fast data is lifted off the CD. Most are 24x or faster, but there's not much difference between 24x and 30x. For about \$100, upgrade to a DVD-ROM drive. Then you can watch movies on the system, too.

Below are some mail order companies and Web sites:

Motherboard Solutions

800-486-2026

[www.motherboardsolutions.com](http://www.motherboardsolutions.com)

Alpha International Business

800-933-5455

<http://start.at/alphainternational>

London Computers

800-750-3468

[www.computerstreet.com/london/](http://www.computerstreet.com/london/)

R&J Technology

800-567-3458

[www.rjtech.com](http://www.rjtech.com)

Web sites that find the best prices for you:

[www.pricewatch.com](http://www.pricewatch.com)

[www.shopper.com](http://www.shopper.com)

[www.streetprices.com](http://www.streetprices.com)

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