THE COLLEGE STUDENT'S PERSONAL COMPUTER HANDBOOK
by Bryan Pfaffenberger

SYBEX, 1984, 210 pgs., (paperback) $14.95
Reviewed by Harry E. Pence*

A recent television advertisement consisted of two contrasting scenes. In the first, an enthusiastic young man is boarding a train to leave for college. Though burdened with enough equipment to start a small boarding school, he isn't really prepared, or so the television voice assures us. The next scene shows the same young man returning home in dejection, a failure because he didn't have a personal computer. Pfaffenberger clearly agrees that a personal computer is a vital piece of equipment for the college student, but he completes the story only hinted at in the commercial, by showing that a college student can do much more with a personal computer, than play computer games.

This is not another book on how to use a computer, but rather is a demonstration of how a personal computer can be especially valuable to a college student. This distinction is the key to understanding the author's selection of topics and the method of presentation. There is almost no discussion of programming or computer languages, because Pfaffenberger feels that user-friendly commercial programs are already available that serve the needs of the typical college student and represent the quickest way to make the computer productive.

Much of the hook deals with the three types of commercial software that experienced users would expect; spreadsheets, word processors, and data base managers. In general, the author uses programs that are well-known, but the emphasis is not on learning how to use a specific program but on learning the capabilities of a general type of program. He discusses several typical problems in detail, showing the reader where a computer could be valuable. For example, he demonstrates a spreadsheet by statistically

manipulating quiz grades from the grade book of a hypothetical student teacher and a word processor by writing and revising a section of a term paper. These and other examples are extensive and realistic.

The section dealing with on-line information services is especially helpful. Pfaffenberger recommends that students use the relatively inexpensive nighttime services, such as BRS/After Dark or Knowledge Index, and he also identifies which academic fields are poorly covered by these services. He describes a good example of a simple search and demonstrates how logical operators can be used to make a search more efficient. The treatment is brief but offers a good indication of the support these services provide.

For this reviewer, the most interesting section was the use of a database management system called Notebook (Pro/Tem Software) to record, retrieve, and reorganize a set of course notes. This discussion not only contained some valuable information about using the computer but also some useful tips on taking and organizing notes. Even though the method described probably requires more effort than most students are willing to invest, many instructors will find the technique interesting. On the other hand, the use of a database management system to do more traditional jobs, such as organizing references, addresses, etc. is discussed only briefly.

The introductory chapter on basic computer concepts is rather concise but contains a reasonable overview of what a beginner needs to know about computers. In addition, there is an appendix containing a brief glossary of commonly encountered terms. Other appendices provide a software and hardware buyer's guide and a guide to inexpensive on-line data base services. The number of recommendations in each category is limited, so that readers may find some personal favorites ommitted. Nevertheless, suggestions provide helpful guidance for a[l] new user.

The author does a good job of showing how the computer can do a broad range of tasks, but probably in no case does the reader learn

enough to actually use the software described. This is not a serious criticism, since the book is obviously intended to be an overview, rather than a tutorial. Once the reader understands what can be done, he or she will seek other sources of information to provide the necessary expertise. A more serious shortcoming of the book is the failure to provide a bibliography or reading list *of* books and journals telling the reader where to go for more information.

Readers of the CCR Newsletter will probably find that they are already familiary with much of the material in this book, but it ran be a good resource for those who are inexperienced and wonder what can be done with a computer. That audience isn't limited to college students, and considering the background many students are obtaining in high school today, it is quite possible that the book may be equally useful to their parents and other adults. Pfaffenberger doesn't necessarily agree with the advertising claim that a student without a computer is doomed to fail at college, but he does suggest a number of areas where the computer may make *a* significant difference.

*Department of Chemistry
SUNY-Oneonta, Oneonta, NY 13820