College addresses business needs with high-tech facility

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The auditorium, which features 160 computer ports wired for Internet access - each interfaced with the Thomas Web-based computer administrative system - is the first of its kind in the country. In addition to easy Web access, the complex boasts advanced voice, video and data technology, along with the ability to link instantaneously with servers at the school's library.

Dr. Martin Bressler, associate vice president of academic affairs, who also oversees the undergraduate business curriculum at Thomas, views the auditorium as another step toward bridging the gap between the state's academic and business worlds.

"The college has always considered itself part of the business community since it's where most of us came from," said Bressler. "Having an electronic auditorium is different from a regular auditorium in that students or business people can come in, plug in, and immediately interact with whatever is going on. For instance, there could be a satellite business conference and members of the community could come in to be a part of it."

Christopher Rhoda, director of information technology for the college, echoed Bressler's assessment that the auditorium is just part of the continuing effort to keep Thomas College a vital member of the business community.
"The auditorium is another piece of the puzzle," commented Rhoda. "Everything done at the college is done the way a business would."

Rhoda was instrumental in designing the school's Web-based computer administrative system, an effort many other schools and businesses have since taken an interest in.

With the exception of payroll information, everything offered through the Thomas computer system is available to users from any computer hooked up to the Internet.
"It makes for a virtual office wherever I am," said Bressler. "Instead of coming in here on the weekend, I can enter grades from home or, if I'm going to be out sick, I can e-mail an entire class and let them know."

Paul Chase, dean of information at Becker College in Worcester, Mass., said a model similar Thomas' system is being used by the bigger dot-coms, like priceline.com and e-Bay.

Rhoda has been a regular speaker at conferences, meetings and trade shows explaining how Thomas created the system and discussing its advantages over the traditional client server-based systems that most colleges and businesses use. He will be giving a presentation on the system at the annual Maine Telecommunications Trade show in Portland on May 9.

One of the keys to Thomas' continued visibility in the Maine business community centers around its plans for the future, which include the creation of a high tech

business incubator on campus.

The college also plans continued partnerships, like the one with Maine InternetWorks (MINT), the largest ISP in central Maine, which was recently acquired by Adelphia Communications.

"(Thomas College) was the only large organization using the Internet when we started up in 1995," said MINT cofounder Vicki Clewley. "The relationship has been great. They have fed our employee needs and we've provided them with bandwidth. Other colleges would be wise to follow their model."