Sunday, May 7, 2000

System at Thomas provides access to information system

By JONATHAN HUMPHREY, Staff Writer

WATERVILLE — When Microsoft Corp. published a case study of Thomas College's Web-based administrative system a year ago, college officials considered the attention a rarity.

Now the Redmond, Wash.-based software giant is putting together a second case study on an even more advanced Thomas-designed system — one that has more than doubled the power of the original.

Called an "Extranet," the system allows computer users outside Thomas to access the college's information system using passwords. Thomas officials say it is arguably the most advanced system of its kind at any college in the nation.

"It's the most sophisticated college system that Microsoft is aware of," said designer Christopher H. Rhoda, director of information technology services at Thomas.

Thomas did not invent the Extranet idea, but has embraced it in a way few other organizations have.

The remote access the system offers seems routine until you consider what it allows users to do.

Password holders can tap into their own files to change addresses and phone numbers, check the status of their latest financial aid request, peruse internal system mail, and receive and pay bills online.

The system automates many tasks with features like event-triggered e-mail to notify high school guidance offices about the status of student applications.

In June 1997, the college began putting student grades on the Web so students could access them while on semester break. Since then, everything from reminders of student birthdays and upcoming meetings to financial aid documents, college budget data and alumni information has gone online.

All of the information is available in real time. As soon as a student's registration for a particular course or a grade for a semester is entered into a database, it becomes available online. That means students can get their grades a couple of days after the semester ends, rather than waiting weeks for something in the mail.

"It doesn't matter where you are in the world, you have the same access you have

sitting right here," Rhoda said, while sitting in his office at the business college on West River Road.

Students are already finding Thomas' Extranet system a huge bonus in balancing busy lives with the pursuit of a college education.

Ryan Connon, a freshman at Thomas who is also a full-time system administrator for a community Internet station in his hometown of Camden, said he has been impressed by the new Extranet system.

"I can get all my grades on there, my final exam schedule," Connon said. "It's a wealth of information, really."

Mary L. Mersereau, a junior at the college who spent last semester studying in France, said she stayed in touch with the college while overseas using the Extranet system.

"You can check your course schedule, even check who else is registered," Mersereau said. "I registered for my classes this semester over the Extranet. That was definitely a lifesaver because I couldn't have afforded the phone bills."

Paul Chase, the dean of information services at Becker College in Worcester, Mass., said the system is drawing looks from other colleges because of its innovative design and the way it caters to student needs.

"This is something that all colleges are looking for," Chase said. "And once one college is doing something like that, students begin expecting it. And not only expecting it, but demanding it."

Chase said he was impressed that a relatively small technology team like the one at Thomas could put together such a sophisticated system in so short a time.

Thomas officials say the system is a big money-saver, and Chase said that alone will interest many other schools and organizations.

"It used to be that your technology costs were more expensive than your personnel costs, but now it's the other way around," Chase said. "We're always looking for ways to keep personnel costs down, and one way of doing this is to have students doing more of their own data entry."

Rhoda said Microsoft is interested in the system not only because it was built using its products, but because it can do things no package available on the market today can do.

"There's no commercial product that does this," Rhoda said. "It's 56 programs — that's it — for all it does."

Once Microsoft completes its case study on the system, the company will use the study

for marketing its products at trade shows and on its Web sites, Rhoda said.

Rhoda and student assistants worked on the system for about three months last year before launching it.

"The toughest thing for us was to figure out how to make it secure," Rhoda said, explaining programmers finally hit on a strategy that includes issuing access codes to personal e-mail addresses to solve the dilemma.

For Thomas officials, now basking in renewed attention from the world's leading software producer, the success of the system only affirms their commitment to being a leader in business-oriented technology, according to Mark Tardif, college spokesman.

"This is the benchmark," Tardif said. "This is what the cutting edge is all about."