Thomas College Set to Unveil Wireless Computer Network for Futuristic Learning

Waterville, Maine --- August, 2001 – Thomas College is set to unveil the first phase of a wireless computer network that will allow students, faculty and staff unmatched 24-hour-a-day computer use. Director of Information Technology Services Christopher Rhoda noted that most of the network will be complete by the time students arrive on campus for Fall classes. The overall project includes four phases.

Assistant Professor of Sports Management and Baseball Coach Greg King tries a laptop computer from the Mobile Computing Laboratory

The wireless network is part of a comprehensive computer upgrade on the Thomas College campus, which has attracted national attention in the past for a variety of computer oriented innovations, including developing the first web-based administrative computer system used by a college in the United States. Rhoda stated that the soon-to-be unveiled wireless computer network available to students and others on campus is the next step in keeping pace with the very

latest in technological innovation. He expects all campus areas targeted for Phase one to be wireless accessible by the second week in September.

Phase two will include additional, less-traveled areas on campus. "Basically, phase one is to install this wireless network on the most heavily traveled areas on campus," Rhoda explained. Phase two will cover additional areas used by faculty and staff, in addition to student dormitory rooms. Phase three will include outside areas on campus, as well as off campus housing. Phase four plans are to integrate with other regional or wireless networks.

Wireless Mobile Computing Laboratory

"Future plans include adding mobile computers that don't even exist today," Rhoda noted. "This device will be somewhere between a cell phone and a mobile computer. It will have capabilities that will include the ability to get or place a phone call, read and send e-mail, browse the web, and access library holdings. They may also access their own personal information, using things like their appointment calendars, contact lists of names, and allow them to make purchases directly from their bank or credit account. All without having to be physically linked to networks."

A Wall Mounted Wireless Access Point

For the present, with a notebook computer in hand, students, faculty, or staff at the College may access the campus computer network without the need to plug-in to a network port mounted on a wall or desk. Such freedom is rare among traditional college and university networks, which are limited in allowing user access to their campus-wide computer network by the number of physical computer ports available. The wireless system at Thomas College eliminates this barrier, allowing entire classes of access to the computer network for instantaneous world-wide information gathering or other uses. "This really allows students and everyone on campus freedom to use their notebook computers in classrooms, the cafeteria, library, student center, dormitories, anywhere on campus," Rhoda explained.

Career Services Director Bob Harriman examines the wall mounted wireless access point outside his office. The veteran career services professional praised the wireless system, noting that the system will further improve an already outstanding campus computing network. "The level of computing and other resources available for use by students, faculty, and staff on campus is exceptional," Harriman noted.

Convenience will not be the only positive aspect to the new wireless computer network. "Not only does this enhance research and hands-on instruction, but it also improves communication and collaboration capabilities," Rhoda said. As more faculty and staff receive these devices, new ways of increasing student learning through the use of technology is being explored and implemented with the help of student and staff information technology specialists.

New classroom applications are many and varied, supported by the addition of a portable computer lab that Thomas College instructors may sign out for use in their classes. The wireless mobile computer lab may be wheeled in to a classroom, with students instantaneously gaining access to the campus computing network, and therefore the entire World Wide Web. Instructors may now teach their classes while their students are seated in any configuration. "Students no longer need to be seated near a wall, or in a straight line, or in a classroom with wires running to every desk," Rhoda explained.

"I think there are many educational applications for this wireless network," noted Thomas College President George Spann. "One professor has already signed out the mobile computing laboratory to use in his Accounting classes. The mobile laboratory and wireless campus computing network are essentially additions to the computing technology already available at Thomas College. Our commitment to keeping pace with the latest technology is evident not only in how we continually upgrade our systems, but in the fact that we have fastest network among all colleges in New England."