

Thomas College leads the way

School's computer network is cutting-edge technology

By DAVID DeTURK
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WATERVILLE — "Thomas College has been one of the most dynamic forces in the state leading Maine toward the possibilities of new businesses," asserted Mark Tardif, director of public relations for the college. "In the past 10 years, we have re-engineered ourselves to improve education and reach out to groups that need business training and services."

One of the major aspects of that re-engineering process has been the development of highly sophisticated networks within the college itself, according to

Christopher Rhoda, director of information technology services.

"To begin with, we have probably the most powerful server system in Maine," Rhoda said. "We also created the first Web-based administrative computer system used by a college in the United States."

According to Rhoda, this system literally links all administrative functions on campus and makes it all accessible to students, faculty and administrators.

"It is so innovative, that Microsoft reported on it and told us that they knew of no other higher education institution in the

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Christopher Rhoda is director of information technology services at Thomas College in Waterville. Rhoda is standing behind a cart of laptop computers that can be rolled to a classroom and still be connected to the Internet and other services without the use of wires.

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country that had developed such a system," he said.

Tardif added, "Many colleges and universities have spent millions of dollars to copy that model. And, Microsoft and others are working on software programs that can be sold to schools directly so they can introduce the system at less cost."

That, however, was only the beginning, Rhoda said.

Thomas College has now unveiled the first phase of a wireless computer network that will allow students, faculty and staff unmatched 24-7 computer use.

In four phases, the network will cover all areas of the campus, including off-campus locations where students live or study.

Most important, from an educational point of view, is the fact that wireless communication will allow students in or out of the classroom to access the world wide web or integrated campus network without plugging in to ports, which are not always available. A portable wireless mobile computer lab will permit an entire

classroom to tie in without need for wires running everywhere and students sitting in some predetermined configuration.

All of this Rhoda said, is directed toward educating students.

"That is our first and primary goal. Innovative technology is great, but it is a means to an end. We are working just as hard on the ends."

Rhoda continued, "We have first-generation college students, nontraditional students, graduate students and we even teach teachers. The key areas for the future are information retrieval and communication and our

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new technology improves both those areas."

As a result, the college has built partnerships that help its students gain experience and expands the college's reach into companies that need education and training.

For example, a new program in computer science began this fall, Tardif said. The college has also added a second bachelor's degree program in information technology. It provides 10 courses in IT for people entering any kind of business. They will learn how to manage, market and build their businesses with the aid of technology.

The college has also entered an "exciting" partnership with the Maine Criminal Justice Academy, Tardif said.

"In many cases, police officers have not been to college. We are offering college-level courses at the academy. We are also leading again by developing a bachelor of science degree in Criminal Justice Administration. In this program, seniors at Thomas will study at the academy during the year, learning real police procedures. Just think how valuable they will be to law enforcement agencies anywhere."

Tardif said, "Thomas College is not the same school most people have known over the years. Yes, we have produced more alumni, mostly Mainers, who are now bank presidents and chief financial officers than any other school in Maine. Now, however, we are much more a regional college than a purely local one. We have a lot more students from out of state than ever before. And, the important point is that many of these students are staying in Maine after graduation. We are producing highly skilled, experienced workers at the highest levels of skills in everything from accounting and management to computer-centered positions."

It might be accurate to say, "It's not your father's Thomas College."