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## Waterville school puts it all on the line — er, online

By ERIC BLOM  
Staff Writer

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WATERVILLE — Admissions counselors at Thomas College fire up laptops and log into the school's advanced information system, through the World Wide Web, every night that they are on the road.

E-mail messages, dispatched automatically to their hotel rooms, announce that particular students have been accepted for admission and remind counselors to make congratulatory calls. Detailed information about individual applicants' grades, hobbies, majors and special needs — updated automatically every seven seconds — is offered through the university's Web site for counselors with a password.

"It's made a huge difference for us in terms of personalizing our recruiting," said Robert Callahan, dean of admissions.

It is an example of the efficiency that Thomas College ([www.thomas.edu](http://www.thomas.edu)) has found by becoming one of the first schools of higher education in the country to move all its information systems to the Web.

In June 1997, the college began putting student grades on the Web, so that individual students could access them while they are 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.

The college is scanning old yearbook photos onto computers so alumni officers can see what graduates once looked like. Pictures of current students already are available on Web pages that offer links to information such as grades, financial aid information, background on their high schools and a host of other data.

Microsoft has recognized the university's system as one of the most advanced uses of its Web technology among colleges nationwide. The big software manufacturer is developing a white paper about Thomas College to use in marketing its products worldwide.

"We are the only school we know of — that Microsoft knows of — that has done this much on the Web," said Chris Rhoda, director of information technology at the college .



Thomas official Christopher Rhoda says Microsoft knows of no other school that has done this much on the Web. *Staff photo by John Patriquin*

Today, about 80 percent of all the college's information can be accessed through the Web. The remaining 20 percent is scheduled to go online by June.

Later this year, the school also will begin giving select access to its information through the Web to high school students, guidance councilors, and businesses that might want to employ Thomas College students. For example, high school students will soon be able to tell whether their guidance counselors have submitted a required recommendation or whether financial aid documents have arrived.

"Everything's online," said Judy Marin, a 21-year-old junior from Old Orchard Beach. "You have to choose your classes online."

Through the school's Web site, students can see what courses are available and what requirements they need to fill. They can read information about their professors and what books are required for each course. In some instances, they can even see who else has signed up for a class.

"It's easier to decide what class to take rather than walking in there on the first day and finding out," Marin said.

All of the information is available in real time. As soon as a student's registration for a particular course or a grade for the 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 more than two weeks for something in the mail.

"I like it because you can go in when the business office isn't open, after hours, on weekends, during vacations, that sort of thing" said Lawrence Wentworth, a 20-year-old junior from Harmony.

Having all that information available via the Web raised some security concerns initially, but the college has addressed them aggressively. It automatically encodes all communications. It warns everyone that they will be punished if they misuse the system or give others improper access to it.

Passwords allow faculty, staff and students access only to the information they could reasonably need.

Workers in the alumni office cannot look at current students' grades. Faculty can look at students' grades, but not their financial status. Students can look at the status of their own tuition bills but not others'.

"One of the things we started with is security," Rhoda said. "We didn't want grades and bills flying around the Internet.

"You always have to think about worst-case scenarios" and guard against them, he said. "Information that could be used to stalk people or whatever."

Security issues aside, the school believes that its Web-based information system will help it develop.

In particular, remote access to information is particularly important as the school tries to diversify its student base to the rest of New England. Currently, 95 percent of its students come from Maine.

"It's allowing a college like Thomas College, that previously was viewed as a rural college, to legitimately take that next step," said Mark Tardiff, a spokesman. "Now, people from outside the state can look at this place as a legitimate opportunity."

That has been the experience of Adam Dubois, a 21-year old junior whose hometown is Pellham, N.H.

"I check my grades (from a home computer in New Hampshire) as soon as I can to see what's coming," he said. A system like the one at Thomas is what businesses and other schools are likely to be using in the years ahead, he said.

"It's all computers," Dubois said. "That's where it's all headed." Remote access to information is important as the school tries to diversify.