

CONNX[®] Case Study

Thomas College

Waterville, Maine

Graduating to new technologies: College's ambitious Web strategy relies on CONNX



- Thomas College implements World Wide Web-based information system using CONNX as the conduit to RMS files stored on its VAX 4000 running OpenVMS.
- Three-tier Web-enablement project depends on CONNX to give students, faculty, staff, alumni, and potential employers access to database.
- Users tap into CONNX-supported system every 6 to 7 seconds from around the campus and beyond.

Thomas College campus

As a business school, Thomas College thinks as much in business terms as it does in academic ones. The school sees its students, faculty, staff, and alumni as customers, and wants to satisfy them. Technology has already helped. For example, by 1994 the school was completely networked over a LAN, with high speed Internet connections at workstations in administrative and faculty offices. Students had Internet access through the college's computer labs, in public areas of the College, in all residence hall rooms, and through dial-up modems. But to make access even easier and more widely available, Christopher Rhoda, the school's vice president of Information Services, looked to the World Wide Web.

Thomas College's evolution to Web-enabled applications began in

1996 when Rhoda set out to solve a different challenge: giving the administrative staff the ability to use Microsoft Access to create and use their own reports from the institution's VAX. An ad and review alerted him to CONNX, an ODBC-compliant driver designed by CONNX to streamline access to data in VAXes. "From my reading I saw that CONNX made it possible for people to get at their RMS data and that it was standards-based. That's exactly what I wanted," he recalls.

CONNX enabled departments and administrative staff to get the reports they needed in minutes, rather than having to wait months for IS to provide them. And users appreciated the visually appealing graphical approach over text-based queries. But these significant improvements were only the

beginning of the positive role CONNX would play at Thomas College.

"When I purchased CONNX, people were not talking about Web-based information systems," says Rhoda, "but within a year, I began to see articles about them." Although Thomas College was already doing a good job of providing information, Rhoda thought the Web offered an even better solution. He looked to CONNX to help him create a new system. "CONNX was working so well as the conduit between Microsoft Access and the VAX that I thought I could use it between the VAX and the Web." He also felt that CONNX would enable him to run two systems in parallel, "As a small school with a small staff, we would be phasing in our system over time. We weren't going to be on the VAX one day

Thomas College Case Study continued

and the Web the next," he explains.

Phase one of the Web strategy yielded a secure and private information system that gives both students and faculty access to information 24 hours a day using any Web browser, on any computer system, in any location that is connected to the campus network or the Internet. Rhoda calculates that the system, which has affected all aspects of student life, is used every 6 to 7 seconds.

Some improvements make activities more convenient. For example, students can view their grades immediately after the information is entered; register for class online, reducing the process by hours; look at course syllabi online; and get billing information. Other uses, such as a gallery of faculty and student photographs, support the school's emphasis on creating a personal, friendly atmosphere. Professors and students alike can view the pictures and learn each other's names prior to the beginning of classes. Automating routine tasks frees valuable time during advising sessions. In addition, the new information system speeds browsing of Internet-based materials for research and study purposes.

Phase two converted all administrative applications, including those for the offices of admissions, financial aid, and the registrar. Tasks that required a phone call, fax, or mail transitioned easily to the Web by the end of 1999, streamlining information sharing.

The third phase involved the design of an campus Infont, available 24 x 7, which enabled prospective students, high school guidance counselors, alumni, and recruiting companies to get into

Thomas' system and handle inquiries and tasks that were previously performed verbally or on paper.

Additionally, the campus Infont delivers a new level of customer service. "For example, we can customize information about teachers, previous syllabi, and sporting events for interested students," Rhoda explains, "and they can update their applications online. They can even view financial aid information." The new system helps expedite job placement as prospective employers can view information about college programs online, and then send their company's requirements to the Career Services Office, which then notifies qualified candidates by e-mail.

Rhoda credits CONNX with helping Thomas implement this vision. "CONNX is the glue that enabled us to integrate PCs and the Web with the existing VAX," he says. "It's a critical piece of our operation and it does everything we want it to." He also appreciates the way CONNX backs the product. "One of the things that has impressed me about CONNX has been their interest in how we're doing," he says. "The rep checks in, and when we had some issues, I talked with the product's designer. Based on my experience with other companies, I am used to being in a long waiting line for technical support and to never getting to talk to the same person twice. I had certainly never talked to the person who developed the product. A day or two after our conversation, he sent me a new release. "

Although Thomas College could be described as a small and regional school, with 1,200 students primarily from Maine, its technology vision mirrors what the Web has proved: the barriers that

once existed based on size and location no longer matter. Any institution, company, or individual with the right vision and products can be a leader and can serve customers well.

About Thomas College: Thomas College is a small, private business college located in Central Maine. For over 100 years, Thomas has maintained its commitment to preparing young people for careers in business, and the school is a recognized leader in this field in the state. Since its inception, the school has remained the state's only college focused completely on business education.

About CONNX Solutions: CONNX Solutions, Inc., with its flagship software product, CONNX, brings universal data access technology to over 3,000 organizations worldwide by enabling access to all enterprise data, regardless of origin, through one interface. The company maintains strategic relationships with industry-leading organizations including Microsoft Corporation; Oracle Corporation; Sybase Inc.; Informix; Computer Associates International, Inc.; IBM Corporation; and Hewlett Packard. Founded in 1989, CONNX remains locally owned and managed through its headquarters in Bellevue, Washington.



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