

CONNX[®] Case Study

Thomas College



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

- 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.

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 Director 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 developed by SolutionsIQ 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 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,

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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 on-line, reducing the process by hours; look at course syllabi on-line; 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 will convert all administrative applications, including those for the offices of admissions, financial aid, and the registrar. Tasks that now require a phone call, fax, or mail will transition to the Web by the end of 1999, streamlining information sharing.

The third phase involves the design of an extranet. It will enable prospective students, high school guidance counselors, alumni, and recruiting companies to get into Thomas' system and handle many inquiries and tasks currently paper- or verbally-based. In addition, the extranet will help the school deliver a new level of customer service. "For example, we'll be able to customize information about teachers, previous syllabi, and sporting events for interested students," Rhoda explains, "and they'll be able to update their applications on-line." The system will expedite job placement as prospective employers send their company's requirements to the Career Services Office, which will then notify qualified candidates by e-mail.

Rhoda credits both CONNX and

SolutionsIQ with helping him implement this forward-looking 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 SolutionsIQ backs the product. "One of the things that has impressed me about SolutionsIQ 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 had 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.

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.*

SolutionsIQ. *Recently cited as one of America's fastest growing private companies by Inc. Magazine, and one of the nation's fastest growing technology companies by Deloitte & Touche and NASDAQ, SolutionsIQ develops and markets CONNX, a unique family of universal data access software products. SolutionsIQ is also a premier provider of software consulting and development services to clients such as Microsoft, IBM, STARWAVE, Oracle, and many others. Founded in 1979, SolutionsIQ is headquartered in Bellevue, WA, and is a licensed business partner of Microsoft and Digital Equipment Corporation and maintains strategic business alliances with companies including Shared Medical Systems (SMS), HealthVISION, SCT, and Tiburon.*

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Creative Concepts in Computing

Software Products Division
1800 112th Ave NE, Suite 150
Bellevue, WA 98004 USA
TOLL-FREE (888)88.CONNX
FAX (425)453.8871
e-mail CONNX@SolutionsIQ.com
www.SolutionsIQ.com