

## Duquesne University Gears Up for Distance Learning in Undergraduate and Doctoral Programs

**P**ITTSBURGH, Duquesne University has selected SoftArc's FirstClass Intranet Server (FCIS) as the distance learning tool for bringing students and teachers together in virtual classrooms, free of academia's traditional bricks and mortar. Online conferences are the future of distance learning programs at Duquesne.



An estimated 1,500-2,000 students, faculty and administrators in undergraduate departments and doctoral programs at Duquesne use FCIS to replace much of their traditional face to face contact with electronic communications, from class instruction and e-mail to chat conferences and group projects. Long-term plans call for expanded use of FCIS throughout the University, which is aiming for "10K in 2K" (10,000 students in the Year 2000).

Nationally, 86% of 1,000 colleges and universities polled in a recent survey by Peterson Guides say they offer distance learning courses, up from 76% in 1996. The Internet was the most popular delivery mechanism (68%), compared to videocassettes (67%) and CD-ROMs (15%).

Duquesne has four stand-alone Pentium-class Dell servers (named for famous educators Socrates, Dewey, Wolf and Sagan) running FCIS. Each server has 128 or 256 megabytes of RAM and multiple hard drives. TCP-IP links are used for access. The primary server is licensed for 1,600 users on FCIS in the doctoral nursing program and some undergraduate departments. Another machine, dedicated to the doctoral pharmacy program, has 300 users, and will soon be upgraded to the current version. Duquesne's Center for Academic Technology uses the third FCIS server. The fourth server handles 1,000 users in the education department. System administrators can add more users to existing servers or set up new servers to meet the University's rapidly growing and changing communications needs.

Since Mark Vehec, FCIS Administrator and Education Computing Consultant, arrived at Duquesne in 1996, he has seen distance learning explode, from only a few hundred online users to almost 2,000. "Many of them are professionals in hospitals, pharmacies and labs who don't have time to spend traditional time on campus," Vehec said.

He estimates that 30-50 users are logged on at any one time, but expects to hit 250 concurrent users in the Year 2000. "Students seem to enjoy all aspects of distance learning and the virtual classroom," Vehec said. "Over the last four semesters, students keep asking for more online instruction. They love the ease and convenience of it." Vehec estimates that 60-70% of student-instructor communications is via e-mail or chat on FirstClass, with the balance including phone calls and written correspondence.

The school's philosophy, sociology and communications departments also conduct classes on the primary server. "We use other communications packages on campus, but we want to do more with FirstClass," Vehec said. The computing and technology department uses FirstClass as its primary package "and I use it for everything I do," says Vehec. The

Health Sciences Department also uses the system as its intranet, to exchange files. Communications Department students use FCIS as the primary Web server for its pages and class projects.

"Long term, FirstClass could well be our campus-wide solution," Vehec said. "We're very aware of the success that Emory University in Atlanta has had with FCIS as its primary system. I'm intrigued that a system for almost 20,000 users at Emory can be run from very small machines. Our hardware is much the same as Emory's, so we see the possibilities for a campus-wide package for students, all their mail, as well as Web space on a server for anything they and faculty and administrators want to do."

For distance education, instructors and students use chat and e-mail as a virtual classroom. Duquesne instructors enjoy FCIS's synchronous communications, "online chats are the classroom of today. Students log in on particular days at particular times and interact with classmates and instructors. Using the online conferencing features of FCIS, instructors can easily exclude one groups' access to another group's work in the same class. "Security has been important - when we show instructors how the system can protect course materials on the Web from unauthorized entry, using FCIS, they quickly realize that materials they post are safe," Vehec said.

Students find it easy to log on from home, work or out of town, to participate in the FirstClass online conferences through the Web using standard browser and TCP/IP connections. "We're very grateful for that capability, instead of having to download a client to participate in chat," Vehec said. "Faculty and staff that travel a lot can also interact easily with their students and colleagues when traveling. They just log in via a Web browser, so we have ubiquitous access to the package."



Cross-platform capability of FCIS was the primary reason it was adopted. Mac and PC clients were needed, and both Mac and Windows NT servers are in use on campus – dual platform support was essential. Ease of use is the other reason: most of the 30 instructors that currently offer distance learning on the system needed only one hour of instruction before offering classes online. "Anyone with basic knowledge of computers can set up FCIS conferences," Vehec said. "We were amazed at how quickly everything was up and running. On both Mac and NT systems, we've had absolutely no problem setting up and maintaining everything. FCIS is very stable, with no issues in terms of restoring a backup."

Vehec praises synchronous communications as strength of the FCIS package. "That's key. Students and faculty stress that they have to communicate very rapidly, and e-mail just isn't the solution. They want to log on, call someone into a chat session, or meet in an online conference area at a specified time for one-on-one exchange of discussion and documents. Other packages

only have message boards, which aren't fast enough communications for us. It's also critical that FCIS e-mail lets our users send non-compliant attachments across the wide spectrum of machines we deal with. Our old e-mail systems couldn't handle attachments, or required too much specialized knowledge to use them. With FCIS, I can send a Word document and know it'll be received."

"It's an ideal tool for schools at any level because it's a seamless integrated system for Internet access and distance learning," says Frank Sowa, President of Xavier Group, the SoftArc reseller who installed the system at Duquesne. "We constantly hear from customers that FCIS is easy – to administer, to learn and to use. It is very stable, never breaks down. And customers love its scalability – FCIS fits an organization, no matter how large. There's not another product as scalable."

Vehec sees distance learning for on-going professional education as sheer necessity. "There is growing demand for it from both the faculty and our CEU (Continuing Education Unit) students, in terms of time and cost management. While face to face instruction will never be eliminated, so many people don't have time for traditional on-campus programs. They will take some CEU classes, perhaps all classes, online. It will have to be that way." He has been experimenting with batch administrative commands on FirstClass for handling a wave of new user signups each semester. He noted that there were several online testing and curriculum management options for FCIS and FirstClass Collaborative Classroom (FCCC).

Vehec foresees a long future for FirstClass Intranet Server at Duquesne. "We're really happy with the FirstClass education package."

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