

University of Maine Sets the Standard for Online Communication

Open Text FirstClass® provides a secure online environment for communication, collaboration, and safe social networking



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– John Gregory
Executive Director,
Office of Information Technologies,
The University of Maine

Located in the town of Orono along the banks of the Stillwater River, The University of Maine (UMaine) is a public research university. It is the Land Grant and Sea Grant University for the state. UMaine is one of New England's premier universities, and with an enrollment of nearly 12,000

students, it is the largest university in the state. Students are offered a wide variety of programs and opportunities with world-class faculty members, nationally recognized research, and first-rate facilities.

Each year, as high school graduates prepare to enter university, there are many decisions to consider and challenges to overcome in making that transition from high school to university. However, for first-year students at UMaine, that transition is a little easier because they are given Open Text FirstClass® accounts before they even step on campus.

FirstClass enables UMaine to communicate with the students through collaborative online communities, providing them with the information and resources they'll need before the semester begins. And once the academic year is underway, FirstClass becomes a key part of their university experience.

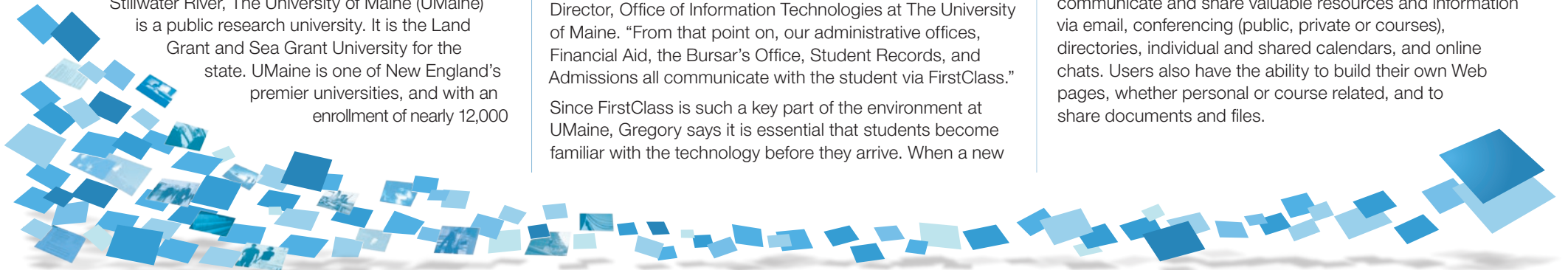
"As soon as students are accepted to the university, the Admissions Office sends them a letter in the mail that contains a URL and a unique code to access their FirstClass account. Hopefully this will be one of the last pieces of paper that we send to them," says John Gregory, Executive Director, Office of Information Technologies at The University of Maine. "From that point on, our administrative offices, Financial Aid, the Bursar's Office, Student Records, and Admissions all communicate with the student via FirstClass."

Since FirstClass is such a key part of the environment at UMaine, Gregory says it is essential that students become familiar with the technology before they arrive. When a new

student opens their FirstClass account, they are presented with information about financial aid, class schedules, and FirstClass conferences for every academic department. FirstClass conferences are online permissions-based spaces that enable students and faculty to securely communicate, collaborate, and interact on shared topics of interest. "So if they're enrolling in courses in the Philosophy Department for example, they can go to the Philosophy space and find information about the faculty, seminars, and other activities within that specific curriculum," he says.

The Bursar's Office, which is responsible for student billing and collecting and posting payments on student's accounts, can post a message in a conference to let the new student know that there is a bill coming due. The message contains a link that students can click on, and using their ID and password, they can get the specific details about their bill in a secure Web site.

FirstClass has been UMaine's official communications system for more than 14 years, connecting students, faculty, and alumni through collaborative online communities. FirstClass provides all students with the ability to effectively communicate and share valuable resources and information via email, conferencing (public, private or courses), directories, individual and shared calendars, and online chats. Users also have the ability to build their own Web pages, whether personal or course related, and to share documents and files.



“A lot of universities go to great lengths to make a Web portal for all of the information that students need with links to things and so forth,” says Gregory. “FirstClass is our portal. It’s not the Web, but it is the portal for the students at the university. It’s a very secure environment.”

One system, many solutions

UMaine is the flagship campus of the seven campus University of Maine System. At the time that UMaine selected FirstClass, the only email that was being offered to the seven campuses was a text-oriented, line-oriented mainframe email system. “UMaine initially adopted FirstClass to provide a more graphical interface to email and enable users to securely communicate within the System’s online community,” says Gregory. “However, we saw the benefits of FirstClass beyond email—we could see that there was a whole suite of opportunities. So even in the early days, it was viewed as more of a collaboration system than just a pure email system.”

At the core of FirstClass’ collaboration capabilities are FirstClass Conferences and Work Spaces (for smaller teams). These permission-based shared spaces facilitate topic based discussions, email, resource sharing, and more. Every semester, UMaine creates course conferences in FirstClass for most of the 650 courses that are offered. “The content in the conferences vary because it’s driven by each faculty. Some create a conference simply to facilitate assignment drop boxes for students. Others use the collaboration capabilities and students can chat and hold topic-based discussions. It varies a great deal from course to course,” says Gregory. “Some use it as a way of incorporating all of the multimedia they use. The students that are enrolled in the course have permission to access it, and once in, there are links that go to other multimedia, streaming video and podcasts, and so forth. So some conferences are used to bring all of the materials together. Others use it for testing. Still others are completely based in FirstClass. It’s quite a range of things.”

Customer

University of Maine

Industry

Higher Education

Business Solution

- Open Text FirstClass

Business Challenges

- Insufficient email system
- Unable to communicate and collaborate efficiently
- Inability to share class resources, assignments, and hold secure peer discussions

Business Benefits

- Cost-effective, flexible, easy to manage, and administer
- Creates collaborative online communities that enhance communication and collaboration between students, faculty, and alumni
- Students have a safe and secure networking environment
- Content can be accessed anywhere, anytime, from any type of Internet-enabled computer or handheld device

Gregory has found that students prefer to post their assignments in FirstClass rather than having to physically hand in their papers. “I think that’s one of the primary reasons that we have almost 650 course conferences this semester: to exchange documents that the students have created. In most cases, it’s from the student to the instructor. In some cases, there’s collaboration among students on teams and so forth. Everyone’s busy schedules make FirstClass imperative to these collaborative efforts.”

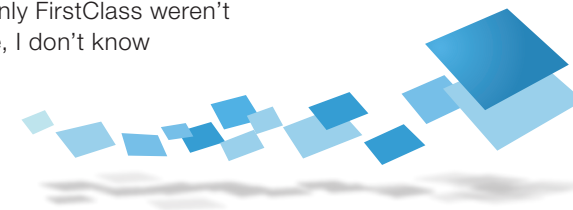
With FirstClass, the students at UMaine have easy access

to a variety of tools and resources via a personalized desktop that is presented each time they log into the system. The FirstClass desktop acts as a portal, providing a summary view of all applications the student has been granted access to and one-click access to all FirstClass features and components.

“The students love it. I think that’s why it persists as such an integral part of the university experience,” says Gregory. “Years ago, when a student graduated, we needed to take their FirstClass account away from them to recycle the licenses for new students coming in. Well, there were tears and excuses and reasons why we shouldn’t take their FirstClass account away from them. I think that’s a testimonial to the fact that students are very fond of their FirstClass accounts and the link that it maintains with the University. And I think that’s true even today with all of these other social networking technologies that are available to them; they still embrace FirstClass as part of their university environment.”

FirstClass affects every aspect of university life

Gregory offers examples of some of the other ways that FirstClass is used at UMaine outside of course management and sharing class resources. “Student elections are held on FirstClass. For example: student government. We have our students classified in such a way that if they are residents, then we know that the ballot is on their desktop in the morning at 9:00 am until that night at 5:00 pm and they have all day to vote. Automating this process has been very effective for us. It saves an enormous amount of time. We’ve been doing it this way for a number of years now. We don’t have an alternative method anymore,” he says. “If suddenly FirstClass weren’t available, I don’t know



how the students would run an election for government because they've become quite dependent on it. It also automates the process, so the next morning we can announce the winner and people don't have to count ballots in a backroom somewhere. There is a folder in FirstClass for the business of the student government. It contains all of the notes of their meetings, the activities, announcements of upcoming events, etcetera."

The university also has an area in FirstClass where general announcements are posted for things like concerts on campus, poetry readings, plays, and etc. "It's something of an activities calendar that everyone has access to. During the semester we also have a very active lost and found folder."

UMaine clubs and sports teams have their own FirstClass conferences, as Gregory explains, "There's a whole set of activities that are just for students including areas for all of the social fraternities and sororities. There are also areas for the honorary fraternities and sororities that are involved with some academic disciplines. We have a Veterans Club. We have a Jugglers Society. The racquetball team, the photography club, a number of computer related folders, a rock-climbing club, a Japanese club. There are hundreds of these conferences, and they are mostly student initiatives."

Students joining these conferences can publish and share their thoughts, interests, photos, bookmarks, files, and so on, with other like-minded students. FirstClass provides a dynamic yet safe electronic social networking environment that is controlled and managed internally.

"We have a Center for Teaching Excellence at the university, which works with the faculty for professional development. The Center regularly uses FirstClass to post announcements and notices about seminars, and there are peer discussions in this area as well," says Gregory.

The Career Center has a conference on FirstClass to help students find part-time jobs while they are still in school, and full-time jobs once they graduate. Dining services posts the menus and specials for each of the dining halls in an area in FirstClass as well as their hours of operation. "The list is endless. Parking services uses FirstClass to let students know that their parking stickers are due. Housing has an area with information about residence halls and vacancies. I mean, every aspect of university life is on FirstClass in some way. The classroom activities and course activities are really only a small part of how we use FirstClass," says Gregory.

FirstClass also offers a place for the different departments to collaborate with students and the faculty, as Gregory explains, "Obviously there's student-to-student and faculty-to-student communications, social activities, discussions, and so forth, but the faculty also use FirstClass in their own professional work. For instance, I run the IT department and I have the help desk as part of the department. There's a conference in FirstClass for the help desk. So while we're only open 12 hours a day where someone can actually walk in and get help, people can send in messages to the help desk 24/7 and get answers. That's very popular. I mean, we get thousands and thousands of inquiries for help every year."

For the students and faculty this means they do not have to waste time travelling across campus for support, and they also benefit from improved service. "The campus sits on 600 acres. It's a good three-quarter of a mile from my office to offices at the other end of the campus," says Gregory. "The help center is in a building near me, but our computer repair center is down at the other end, so they are more than half a mile apart. For a student, that's a long way to go. If we can diagnose a problem online using FirstClass and other technologies that we have, it saves a lot of running around and carrying your computer all over

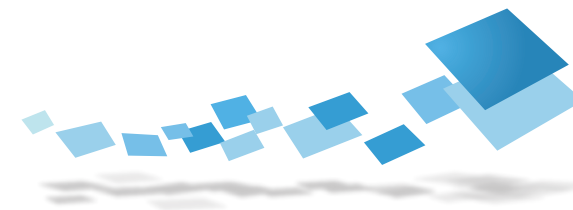
the campus. If students and faculty have questions, we prefer that they either call or send messages in FirstClass. We'd rather have them do that than come and stand in line at the help desk."

Supporting Alumni Communications

FirstClass also provides a collaborative environment that allows UMaine to easily disseminate information to school alumni. With FirstClass, the university can keep alumni apprised of the latest school news and upcoming events; solicit alumni participation in school activities or request referrals; and support fundraising activities.

"The alumni community really started to grow when the graduating students told us they did not want to give up their FirstClass accounts. We talked with our alumni association, who charges dues for membership, and made a deal with them that if students join the association upon graduating, they could keep their FirstClass accounts. The students were excited about that. We currently have around 1,800 alum users on the system," says Gregory. "We've created a special ID for those users so we can recognize them as alums and can send special mailings to them. For instance, the alumni association sends mailings just to the alums about homecoming weekends.

"Another area that we're exploring is our continuing education department so they'll know the alums who have graduated and entered professional careers, but have come back to take a course or start a master's degree for example. This is another way for the



association to stay in touch with the alums. It has been going on for a few years now and it continues to be quite popular,” adds Gregory.

More efficient operations

According to Gregory, enhanced communications is the greatest benefit of FirstClass. It offers a single, easily-accessible environment for “anytime, anywhere” access via computer, handheld device, or phone, for all faculty, staff and students.

“When we have a snow day in the winter, many people will look in FirstClass to see if the university is open that day. We have other technologies that we could use, including the Web and text messaging, but FirstClass is still the dominant technology here,” he says. “FirstClass is the technology that we use to let the community know about any situation, be it an emergency or even the loss of a faculty member. I don’t know how we would get those messages out without FirstClass. Within IT, if there are new computer viruses or phishing emails, for instance, we use FirstClass to spread the word about that. So, for me, having a reliable communication tool is clearly the number one benefit of FirstClass.”

Gregory understands the financial benefits of FirstClass, such as savings in paper, postage, and eliminating the costs of other software packages, but he says if you consider how it enhances education, you can’t really put a price on that. “We’re in the midst of budget cuts like every other American university and every once in a while the issue will come up about whether we need to keep FirstClass since there’s still email available through the University of Maine System. Well, the faculty and the students will be the first to answer that question emphatically that we can’t get by without FirstClass. It’s not just because they’re comfortable with it and don’t want to change; it’s because it’s a part of the UMaine experience. I mean, we could use other technologies, but I can’t imagine not having FirstClass.”

Gregory concludes, “In our current society, with wikis and blogs and Twitter and so forth, I would expect that interest in FirstClass, by both faculty and students, would have faded a little bit. But, frankly, it has not. Even the students that grew up with all of the collaborating technologies still adopt FirstClass quite easily and willfully. The faculties like it because it’s more of a controlled environment rather than being wide open on the Web.”

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