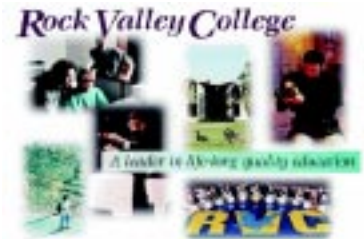


SoftArc Site of the Month - August 1998

Community College Conferences and Courses Go Online with FCIS

Students and teachers at Rock Valley College are using SoftArc's FirstClass Intranet Server (FCIS) for improving communications at the Rockford, Illinois school. Rock Valley's FCIS server runs on a small Pentium 133 (48 megabytes of RAM memory, four gigabytes of hard drive space) that will be replaced with a dual-processor setup later this year.



Before choosing FCIS, the college also tried and rejected the Web browser-based approach because few of the college's faculty and staff use or understand HTML computer language, on which those systems are based. FCIS offers collaboration features not offered by these Web-based solutions: online conferencing and simple document publication and distribution without HTML user conversion. The FCIS client software for users is available on their Web page, along with instructions for downloading and installing Windows 3.1, Windows 95 and Macintosh versions.



"The online component is so important," says Tom Lombardo, Associate Professor of Electronic Engineering Technology. Lombardo designed the college's EdNet Web page (<http://ednet.rvc.cc.il.us>) and worked with Dr. Fred Siewers, who was the original proponent and designer of Rock Valley's EdNet online student e-mail and conferencing system.

Mr. Lombardo currently administers the FCIS-based EdNet system. "The average age of students is 29. My students and others miss class because of work or family obligations. But with the assignment posted online, professors avoid a lot of photocopying, and students don't have to pick up an assignment. They can always catch up by going online."



Some 550 students used EdNet during the '98 spring semester. The system includes 460 conferences. About 20 active faculty members are using EdNet in their classes, with dozens of others using it for e-mail. About 5,000-6,000 students are enrolled in credit classes, with another 6,000-7,000 in community education (non-credit classes).



More than 30 courses contain online content despite the system's relatively new status at Rock Valley. Lombardo plans to put one of the courses he teaches fully online next spring. Other professors also plan to offer online courses. "We're just moving into the distance education area, and EdNet has a lot of potential here," he says. "For example, in my PC Repair class, the textbooks can't possibly keep up with industry changes. I use the web to supplement my lectures and the textbook readings. It's more convenient to type the web addresses in e-mail messages and have the students simply click on the address. It eliminates a lot of the paper duplication costs associated with course supplements." EdNet daily e-mail messages total several thousand a day, and should grow substantially with more users and classes going online.



Lombardo particularly likes FCIS's message history "to know whether someone's read your message or not", and the easy sorting of messages according to topic, thread, and chronology. "I love to explore the software, and click on any and all buttons," he says. "We show our users all the major features in our training, so they can get maximum use out of the system."

The system's e-mail capabilities are "very, very powerful" even in comparison to the college's standard, which is Novell's GroupWise. "Our users often forward GroupWise messages to FirstClass for easier handling and simplicity," he comments. With FCIS's cross platform capabilities, the school's PCs and Macs can use the application's capabilities equally well.

The school started using FCIS in November, 1997, thanks to its working relationship with Emory University in Atlanta, another FCIS user. "We used guest accounts at Emory to try FCIS out for awhile last fall," Lombardo says. "It was the only product we evaluated and used. It's working well." He sees the next step as burning the FirstClass client and settings file onto a CD-ROM for the system's users. He also wants to put e-mail capabilities on the Web link, similar to Emory's LearnLink system, using Java script.

Lombardo has set up a subconference, Computer Talk, for his course in computer repair. Administrators, teachers and students post computer questions to the conference, and Lombardo's students answer them as part of their curriculum. "It's a great way to teach them to give e-mail technical support, which is so important in the computer industry," he says. Other teachers post lecture notes and assignments online, which frees up class time.

Lombardo found it easy to set up the system's main conferences on FCIS. He's working with faculty in each division to set up subconferences. Student clubs have their own Web pages moderated by students, and the school plans to offer student Web pages when the Pentium 133 is replaced. "We'll also be offering student conferences that will be closed to faculty and staff, so they can discuss whatever they want," Lombardo said. "We felt students need a forum only for them, where they could speak freely without worrying about non-students reading their comments."

Lombardo says FCIS's speed is "quite good." Customization features, the icon file and custom sounds are drawn from the Emory University FCIS installation. He's found that teaching users about FCIS is easy, especially when he emphasizes the basics of the system for those that aren't computer literate. "And a lot of people pick it up easily, with no training at all," he says. Lombardo and other FCIS supporters are recruiting new users in a grassroots door to door campaign to among faculty and students. "FCIS is great for conferencing and e-mail," he says. The school's faculty has supported the FCIS system, with Lombardo handling the technical aspects of the system's implementation. "I'm glad I got involved, because FCIS has worked out very well for us," he said.

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From his own web site.

