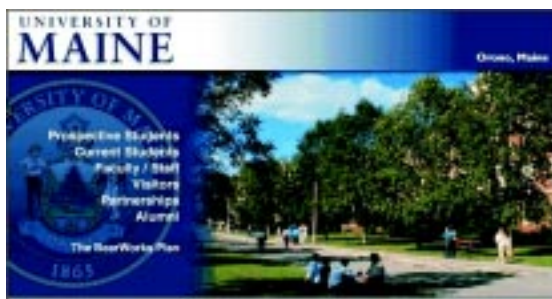


## FCIS: Its Reign In Maine Is All Gain, No Pain



The University of Maine at Orono has tailored its FirstClass Intranet Server (FCIS) to "create virtual space all over the place," says Michael Scott, Administrator at the University's Orono campus. Scott first adopted FirstClass (FC) in 1991 after students downloaded a demo copy.

One of the first universities to use FCIS, Maine-Orono now totals 9000 users and offers 300 classes online per semester. Every department in the University uses it extensively, including student groups in 119 conferences. "It's now an institution-wide communications tool," Scott says. "We cover everything from

students' social life to faculty conferences to academic classes to student organizations to administrative use." The system is TCP/IP based, and includes 100 lines for remote access to the campus network.

Given budget constraints and minimal staff, Scott doubts other schools could replicate this type of environment. "During the school year, we have 400-500 online simultaneous sessions going on, which would really bog down other systems," he says.

FCIS requires less network investment and ongoing support than other groupware. Scott estimates that hardware and software combined have cost less than \$100,000 since first adopting FirstClass in 1991. This includes the cost of upgrading and expanding both hardware and software over the last eight years. "That's phenomenal for a system as widely used and as critical as this one has become," he said.



Scott especially likes FCIS's ease of administration, efficiency, integration with the Web and support for distance education. He says FCIS is unsurpassed in its ability to create virtual space for any and all groups and opinions at the University. "Groups can have their own conferences that no one else sees. Its construction is very flexible. We can create many environments very quickly tailored to our organizations. Thanks to FCIS, students have their own space for animated discussion while creating a more constructive academic environment." In virtual space, Scott has created poetry corners, debate corners and "enter-at-your-own risk" environments.

Scott rates administration as extremely easy, requiring less than a full-time person. "We provide a critical service with little time invested," he adds. "We can tailor quickly to user demands, with little maintenance. Almost no training is needed, except for faculty learning to set up conferences, homework drop boxes, and discussion groups."

Students have taken to the system, pressuring faculty to set up conferences for their classes. Even professors who aren't computer literate find FCIS simple to use. "Most faculty previously used a mainframe e-mail system, Command Line," Scott says. "Putting FCIS in front of them makes a night and day difference in their ability to use technology to teach."

The University's new President used FCIS to solicit comments on his plans for a new direction for the school. "He was totally amazed—it was like having a New England town meeting online, to get a sense of what the campus was thinking. There was no way to duplicate it by holding individual meetings all over campus," Scott says.

Hardware on campus runs the gamut from 386s to Pentium 400 to Macs. FCIS has bridged the gap of maintaining a cross-platform environment. Even with multimedia, files upload and download easily through the system without use of Zip drives.



*The State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts became Maine University in 1897.*

Scott investigated other systems, but says only FCIS "meets our requirements and provides the level of system we need on one server with minimal effort. It just isn't possible other conferencing systems."



Distance education is growing rapidly throughout the state of Maine, and the Orono campus is adding Web-based course material using FCIS. The faculty insisted on it, based on their high opinion of FCIS. "Now, faculty members who attend conferences comment on how far ahead we are in our communications," Scott says.

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