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Case Study

Teacher preparation at UT-Austin gets a collaborative boost from Centrinity's FirstClass Intranet Server Gold

> "*FirstClass has enabled us to develop viable collaborative knowledge-building schools with teachers and students — locally, nationally and globally.*"
>
> Paul Resta, Director, Learning Technology Center, College of Education, University of Texas at Austin

• The College of Education: a model of collaborative learning

A major national initiative is afoot, with significant funding by the U.S. Dept. of Education, to help colleges of education integrate technology into their teacher preparation programs. The College of Education (COE) at the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin), the state's flagship university, exemplifies the varied uses to which a university can put cutting-edge technology to teach teachers.

• Preparing teachers for the classrooms of the future

COE (ranked 7th among publicly funded graduate programs in education) has one of the largest teacher preparation programs in the U.S. Its five departments are using **FirstClass Intranet Server Gold (FirstClass Gold)**, the web-based communication and collaboration application from Centrinity Inc., to enhance teacher preparation and collaborative learning across the curriculum, and to help area schools develop collaborative learning programs.

• FirstClass Gold/TeachNet @ COE/UT-Austin

All students and faculty members in COE are entitled to a FirstClass Gold account for **TeachNet**, as the college's system is called. Instructors use it as a tool for communication and a means to deliver classroom instruction. A number of classes use it as a discussion and collaboration forum. The system also supports the Four Directions Grant to provide professional development opportunities to teachers in Native American schools in isolated areas and to support cross-school learning projects.

FirstClass Gold/TeachNet currently has 2,811 users, and that's expected to increase by 200 new users each semester as new pre-service teachers complete their required technology competencies. And there are also users in partner schools across North America.

COE uses TeachNet primarily in classes, as a supplement to traditional lecture-based education. One Instructional Technology class, however, meets face to face only four times and otherwise exists only on TeachNet. Two other web-based classes use the system for all of their online communications, mentoring and submission of work.

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A short history of TeachNet

FirstClass/TeachNet began operations at COE in January 1993. Later, a grant provided funds for upgrades to the system and personnel for administration and training. Professor Paul Resta, Director of the Learning Technology Center, and graduate student Mark Christal became involved. Shortly after that, Instructional Technology classes began using FirstClass/TeachNet as a discussion and collaborative forum and as a means of accessing and submitting assignments and related resources. Later, a few other classes began to make use of the system; then it was expanded to provide online support and professional development to teachers.

From Microsoft Mail to FirstClass Intranet Server

In 1998, the entire College migrated from Microsoft Mail to FirstClass. In 1999, TeachNet was upgraded to FirstClass Gold. In the fall of 2000, Professor Resta's CSCL (Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning) course migrates to the web. Like its on-site predecessor, the course focuses on the theories, strategies and design of collaborative learning projects.

● FirstClass Gold: hassle–free, feature–rich application

How did COE choose FirstClass? The college needed a fully TCP-IP compatible cross-platform system. "FirstClass provided the needed functionality as well as a number of other desired features — separate class and project conference folders, chat features and web-serving — to support our instructional and administrative needs," says Michael Bell, AV Educational Specialist and FirstClass Administrator. Besides the much-praised conferencing features, the newest release, FirstClass Gold, offers users personal and group calendars, voice messaging, pager support, a built-in QuickTime viewer, improved web interface, drag-and-drop graphics in messages and easy home page creation.

● Computer–aided collaboration

Some of the teacher-preparation courses make use of student groups called "cohorts" to build knowledge, with the help of FirstClass Gold's many collaboration-facilitating features. Conferences, which according to Bell are "not equaled in any other application," provide a virtual meeting place. To showcase their team assignments, students can post them online using the home page creation tool. Because FirstClass Gold is so easy to use and administer, it can help learning teams focus on the task at hand — learning. And isn't that what all good computer applications should do?

Connecting Four Directions with FirstClass Gold

The Four Directions Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, has developed collaborative partnerships with three major universities and one Native American university to provide professional support in curriculum development, technological expertise and connectivity. UT-Austin has been using FirstClass to support online graduate level courses offered to teachers in remote Native American schools across the country as a means of facilitating mentoring, conferencing, collaborative work and submission of assignments. The students in the Native schools also use FirstClass to work on cross-school learning projects and to collaborate with the UT-Austin faculty and staff. As part of American Indian Net Day, Native students communicated with high level officials from the Dept. of Interior and Education and with Vice President Gore's office. In 1998, the Four Directions Project won the Government Executive magazine award for outstanding and innovative use of technology.

"There are 19 Native American schools in 10 states in our project. FirstClass has been an ideal forum for collaboration. Students had posted their artwork and creative writing, participated in email and collaborative projects, and had great fun chatting. Teachers have shared resources, discussed common issues, and posted class assignments. It has greatly enriched the sense of community among our partners."

Nancy Allen, Curriculum Coordinator, Four Directions Challenge in Technology
Learning Technology Center, College of Education, University of Texas at Austin

● **For more information on the Learning Technology Center,**
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