



New Digital Signage Solution for Thomas College

- **Industry:** Education
- **Client:** Thomas College
- **Region:** North America
- **Solution:** Digital Signage
- **Products:** iCompel®



THE BACKGROUND

Thomas College, a private liberal arts and business education institution in Waterville, Maine, prides itself on providing the most current technology for its 1100-plus students. Embarking on an ambitious plan to meet its growing enrollment, the college began an expansion project in 2011. Following a 10-year plan, the college aims to transform the campus into a first-class setting, with the addition of new classrooms, a new library, new residence halls, new athletics facilities and fields, and improvements and enlargements to its George and Marty Spann Student Commons, a hub of activity on the Thomas College campus.

THE CHALLENGE

While upgrading facilities, the college decided it had the perfect opportunity to upgrade its infrastructure for communicating with students and staff in common areas. This would fit into the school's plan to better disseminate information across campus.

Specifically, the college wanted to replace its existing video signage system, ThomasTV, a video-over-IP system for broadcasting campus information over three "channels" to its various buildings. ThomasTV had its advantages, but bandwidth issues complicated the distribution of content through this IP data channel. The college went looking for a new digital signage platform.

THE SOLUTION

The college evaluated different systems from various vendors and, in the end, settled on Black Box's iCompel, an integrated hardware/software platform for networked content distribution.

An on-campus audio/video consultant had seen the iCompel system at an industry trade show, liked what it had to offer, and recommended it to Thomas College. The campus IT Services Department, under the leadership of Chris Rhoda, the college's VP for Information Services and CIO, then requested a demo unit from Black Box, who assisted the college with getting started on its system testing. "It was a new product for us and just having someone walk us through was all that was needed," Rhoda says.

After a day or two of evaluating the appliance's capabilities, the college placed the order for iCompel. Getting started with the new signage system was quite easy. Having to train the various staff members on its use and learning how to best integrate PowerPoint® presentations into signage layouts were the biggest hurdles. But once that all was figured out, the iCompel signage implementation went well.

"I recently attended an EDUCAUSE conference focusing on IT use in higher education and had seen different signage products, but this was the best for us," Rhoda says.

"The iCompel gives us an easy way to communicate engaging content on strategically placed monitors in the least amount of time. Using the integrated software, an IT Services staff person builds a channel and, from there, other staff members just log in and add content for screens in their specific departments. The process is very straightforward and enables us to have the most up-to-date information on all of our displays.

The extra bonus is the low amount of bandwidth used compared to typical video-over-IP technologies."

Chris Rhoda, VP for Information Services and CIO for Thomas College





The application begins with a single iCompel publisher appliance in the college's server room, where it's stored safely in a climate-controlled area. The publisher distributes content over the school's Ethernet network (a 1-Gigabit backbone that will be upgraded soon to 10-Gigabit Ethernet) to 14 iCompel subscriber units, which pull new content and instructions from the iCompel publisher unit on a regular basis. These slim and compact subscribers are VESA-mounted behind the individual HD displays. One iCompel subscriber is Wi-Fi enabled as a backup to the wired Ethernet connection in case the primary link goes down.

Some digital signs are located in the lobbies of the residence halls, the Alfond Athletics Center, and the college's administrative/classroom building. The rest are connected to screens in student commons, which includes the dining center and the college's brand-new Dog Pound café.

With the new system, bandwidth issues are no longer a problem, Rhoda says. "The transfer of content happens just once instead of a continual stream of data," he explains. One big benefit of iCompel is that it doesn't require a lot of network bandwidth. It operates as a store-and-forward device, so it won't compromise other applications running on the network.

"We also like the flexibility," Rhoda says. On the old ThomasTV system, the college was limited to displaying the exact same information on each channel, no matter where it was delivered. Now, the college can customize content for the intended audience. The IT Services Department goes in and builds an iCompel channel, and various staff members add their content, whether it's the head librarian, the directors of student affairs and student life, the dining center director, the dean of admissions, or



others. "Different people can be in charge of different parts of the screen," Rhoda explains.

A whole range of content is displayed. This includes information promoting student events; library-related information shown on the screen above the library's service desk; information welcoming students and parents to campus; weather forecasts; and rotating daily lunch menus on a screen in the dining center.

What's more, the iCompel system also supports "ad hoc" content updates remotely at the screen. This way, staff can instantly add messaging or customize their screen's content for a specific student audience, overriding content fed from the publisher.

Some screens are set up to show content 24/7 while others only run when the building is open. Every sign on campus is either wall mounted or ceiling mounted and set up to show content in a landscape orientation.

RESULTS

The iCompel system has met the college's expectations, and Black Box looks forward to continuing its relationship with Thomas College by supporting new signage in the next phase of its expansion. "We're a college that's growing both in terms of enrollment and facilities," Rhoda says. "And in the next few years, we're going to be adding a brand-new academic building, so we're going to have a whole lot of signage opportunities there."

This building, the new Harold Alfond Academic Center, will include additional library space, classrooms, and offices—areas where the iCompel technology can play an important part in enhancing the college's campus communications.

