**Schools on the cutting edge**

Schools are making increasing use of technology to reach students with learning that engages the senses: Kids now use computers to write essays or perform science experiments; they see history through flashing video images.

USA TODAY examines the high-tech landscape and how it's working in this month's special section.

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**Northwest Missouri State/Maryville**

**Communicating by keystroke**

By Dylan Jones
USA TODAY

When Christi Whitten got to college, she was worried.

Northwest Missouri State's Maryville campus was a forest of computer terminals, monitors and disk drives. And she couldn't even log on.

"I was scared," says the 18-year-old Benjamin, Texas, native. "You really have to know how to use the computer to do anything around here."

Now that she has finished the compulsory two-day orientation for Northwest's 1,400 freshmen and has a trusty 50-page instruction manual at her side, Whitten says, "I don't know what I'd do without it."

Probably not much. Northwest Missouri State depends on high-tech literacy. It's the first public college to undertake a massive electronic renovation, installing computer terminals, telephones and cable TV in every dorm room on campus.

The link now comprises 2,300 terminals and 400 PCs.

The library, faculty offices and administration — even local utilities — are only a few keystrokes away for the college's 6,100 students. "The idea was to prepare students for the sort of technology emerging in all our lives," says Dean Hubbard, Northwest president.

It didn't come cheap: The school spent $2.4 million on the project in 1986, $600,000 since.

But for students, the bill is an affordable $25 per semester to rent a terminal; an additional $25 for a computer printer. Students who live off campus buy their own computers.

On computer, students get:

- **Public information.** Easy access to an updated events calendar, the campus newspaper and a list of scholarship and job openings.
- **Personal services.** Class schedules, an address book and calculator function, and a map to locate student services.
- **Academic embellishments.** Lectures and quizzes for homework, a 20-volume encyclopedia and dictionary and a word-processing program.

The most coveted feature: electronic mail. "We message each other all the time through the terminal," Whitten says.

During the first weeks, "Everyone stayed up to 5 or 6 in the morning just messaging."

Hmmm, silicon socializing?

"It's still the best way to just meet someone or to get in touch with your friends," freshman Tracey Steele says.

There are academic benefits as well. "You can be in touch with a teacher or adviser almost any time," Steele says. "They can actually see what you're working on."

Students don't even have to leave their dorms when cramming for tests: a quick phone call whisks pizza to any room by electric golf cart. But Whitten promises, "We're not computer geeks — attached to our keyboards." These days, most messages locate friends for a later rendezvous.

And students still make it to the library. Since the library's catalog went on-line, available via computer, book circulation has increased from 46,500 volumes in the 1987-88 school year to 55,000 last year.

Next year, students and faculty members will be able to "dial up" videos on either of the college-run TV channels.

And students will get help with their busy schedules. Everyone will have a phone answering machine, too.

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