PCs, Macs and iPads: Managing and Securing Thomas College's Mobile Learning Environment
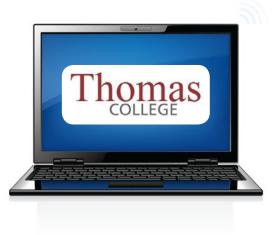
Located in Waterville, Maine, Thomas College is a liberal arts and business school with approximately 1,100 undergraduate and graduate students and 150 faculty and staff. Committed to preparing its students for careers in business, technology, and education, this private college offers its students – many of whom are first generation college students – guaranteed tuition and its graduates guaranteed job placement within six months of graduation. To help students realize their potential and secure well-paying jobs, the college prides itself on cultivating a thriving academic community – providing students with access to the most current mobile computer technology is a part of this mission.

Legacy of Technology Leadership Continues with Computrace

In May 2008, several laptops were stolen from the library and from administrative staff. This prompted the Thomas College IT team to begin the search for a security solution to track and secure its laptop deployment. "The impact of a lost or stolen laptop is significant for us," explains Chris Rhoda, Vice President for Information Services and CIO at Thomas College. "As a small school with a limited deployment of laptops, it not only hurts our tightly managed IT budget but also steals valuable, productive time from our students and staff."

When the college began the process of evaluating what the market had to offer, Rhoda's interest was piqued by a recommendation from Dell, a key technology partner for the college. Dell directed Rhoda to Computrace® by Absolute Software for endpoint security. Thomas College liked what it saw. "Computrace was exactly what we wanted and checked every single box. It's an innovative yet well-established product in the marketplace. Plus Absolute had an impressive track record in education," notes Rhoda.

Since deploying Computrace on every laptop in their deployment, laptop theft at Thomas College has decreased significantly. The built-in, data-rich auditing capabilities of Computrace also play a key role at the college, especially during the summer months when laptops travel with faculty members. Using Computrace, the IT team can closely monitor laptops for periods of inactivity and automatically receive alerts when a device has not been powered on for a predetermined period of time. The team can then check in with faculty to confirm the laptop is accounted for, greatly reducing the risk of misplaced or stolen devices.

"Computrace has been a sound investment for us," emphasizes Rhoda. "It immediately provided peace of mind when we first deployed it, and with a five year rotation of laptops, we're confident it's the right platform to secure and manage our mobile investments down the road as well." Always the educator, the college also intends to share this peace of mind with its student population by recommending Computrace LoJack for Laptops, the Absolute consumer product, for securing personal laptops.

Most Popular: The iPad with Absolute Manage for Mobile Devices

When it comes to the inroads that mobile computing has made in education, the state of Maine is no exception. All elementary schools have laptops and every 7th and 8th grader has a designated device for their individual use. "There are even some programs now where kindergarten kids are getting 1-to-1 laptops—or iPads," notes Rhoda.

Thomas College purchased 30 iPads last year as part of an effort to bring mobile devices into the classroom. "With 95% of our students on financial aid and many of them first generation college students, we realize that they likely don't have the financial resources for their own iPads, so we decided we would provide them," says Rhoda. With a small number of devices reserved for administrative use, the bulk of the devices are housed in the library and are available for students to sign out for on- and off-campus use. Recognizing the portable size and popularity of iPads, Rhoda was concerned about device security and asset management.

"We knew we had to have a solution in place before we made the new iPads available, and we could appreciate that these devices came with unique challenges," says Rhoda. "Given our familiarity with Absolute Software, we had an obvious place to turn and Absolute answered the call with its solution for managing Apple mobile devices, Absolute Manage for Mobile Devices." The college's iPad library program was an immediate hit, 26% of the student population took advantage of the program and signed out a device within the first three months of the fall term.

The Evolving Classroom: Adding Absolute Manage for Mobile Devices

Absolute Manage for Mobile Devices allows Thomas College to remotely manage the mobile devices in their deployment, over 3G or Wi-Fi, as well as wirelessly configure, query and even wipe or lock each device. Not unlike its Computrace deployment, the Thomas College IT team found Absolute Manage straightforward to implement with minimal training time. In fact, one team member had the solution set up on the iPads in a matter of days—for both the library program and for designated administrative staff.

Absolute Manage for Mobile Devices gathers over 67 hardware and software information items from each device, allowing Thomas College to track and maintain an accurate hardware and software inventory of all of its iPads.

The IT team has standardized configurations and can wirelessly push different profiles and settings to targeted devices based upon the end user. All of this work occurs before a student, professor, or administrator even touches the device.

Standard preparation work includes automatically adding Wi-Fi settings, setting restrictions to disable applications or functionality such as iTunes, in-app purchases, multiplayer games, or adding friends. Passwords can also be implemented to help prevent the removal of campus policies and restrictions.

"Absolute has provided us with greater control over how our iPads are used, considerable time-savings, and fewer support incidents – freeing up time for the IT team to focus on higher value efforts that impact our students and faculty," concludes Rhoda. "We're committed to making progressive IT investments that provide our students with the latest technology and tools, and Absolute is a great partner in providing the security and asset management support critical to building the mobile classroom."

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Thomas College

Computrace Technology for Endpoint Security

Through partnerships with computer manufacturers, the Computrace persistence module is embedded into the firmware of computers and tablet devices at the factory. Once the Computrace Agent is installed and activated, Computrace is virtually tamper-proof, even if the firmware is flashed, the device is re-imaged, the hard drive is replaced or a tablet is wiped clean to factory settings.

The Computrace Agent maintains daily contact with the Absolute Monitoring Center, providing detailed data from each device. By logging into the cloud-based Absolute Customer Center, IT administrators can monitor and manage their devices (on or off the network), knowing where they are, who's using them, and what types of software and other applications reside on them. And they can take proactive or immediate security measures for any device that might be at risk.

If a computer is reported stolen, the Absolute Theft Recovery Team works on behalf of the customer to gather evidence from the computer to identify the thief's location, and then works with local police to get the computer back. The IT team at Thomas College can attest to this process, a stolen laptop was successfully recovered within a few weeks.

Absolute Manage Technology for Endpoint Management

Absolute Manage allows IT administrators to manage PC, Mac, iOS, Android, and Windows Phone devices from a single console. Absolute Manage technology delivers authentic cross-platform capabilities so there is no need to invest in additional infrastructure. Instead, existing Mac or Windows servers and hardware components can be leveraged to manage either platform (or both). These cross-platform capabilities extend to IT administrators who can manage all devices from a Mac or a PC.

Agent calls occur throughout the day and provide hundreds of important and current data points from each device. IT administrators use this data to determine what actions are necessary. Then they implement the actions from within the administrator console. Actions can include locating, terminating, removing, or installing applications, licenses, apps, patches, computer images, and other management tools such as power management and asset inventory.

About Absolute Software

Absolute Software Corporation (TSX: ABT) is the world leader in firmware-embedded, persistent endpoint security and management solutions for computers and ultra-portable devices. Positioned as a Visionary vendor in Gartner, Inc.'s Magic Quadrant for Client Management Tools, Absolute's solutions – Computrace, Absolute Manage, Absolute Secure Drive, and LoJack for Laptops – provide organizations with actionable intelligence to prove compliance, generate fast ROI, reduce overhead, manage BYOD, and deliver comprehensive visibility and control over all of their endpoints. The Company's Computrace technology is embedded in the firmware of computers, netbooks, and tablets by the leading computer manufacturers. For more information about Absolute Software, visit www.absolute.com

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