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College Dorms Getting Digital Video

By Nicole Ziegler Dizon

College couch potatoes, take heart: Schools across the country are considering high-quality online video networks for dormitories, meaning lectures could be only a mouse click away.

Northwestern University is in the middle of a $2 million network upgrade that will deliver digital video to all of its dorms, allowing students to watch lectures or other instructional videos without ever leaving their homes away from home. Other colleges are following suit.

University computing chiefs said Tuesday that the technology is one step toward linking hundreds of institutions through a new type of Internet.

"What the Internet did with its present capability, it made it possible for anyone to become a publisher," said Mort Rahimi, Northwestern's vice president of information technology. "The environment we are creating at Northwestern is going to allow each one of our students at Northwestern and our faculty members ... to become producers."

Digital video conveys crisp images into a computer through extremely high-speed connections, eliminating jumpy images and long download times associated with typical Internet video.

Northwestern plans to finish its upgrade within a month, allowing all 6,000 students in its dorms to send and receive digital video, Rahimi said.

The university already has developed instructional videos in Spanish, French and German, and has hooked up a new lecture hall with digital capabilities. Students will be able to watch lectures in real time or hook up to the video later.

The video capability was made possible through Northwestern's participation in Internet2, an experimental computer network with speeds 45,000 times faster than the best telephone modems used to surf the Web. The network is limited to the academic world.

Other schools participating in the Internet2 project include the University of Pennsylvania, which expects to have its dorms wired and ready by 2002.
Rahimi said digital video is fully interactive and combines several forms of communication. For example, film students could watch a movie in a box on their computer screen, pause it and then connect to text files explaining the lighting or dialogue.

Among the challenges is reaching students who don't live in dorms a majority of this country's college population, said Janet Poley, president of the American Distance Education Consortium in Lincoln, Neb.

"Our students live everywhere," Poley said.

Participating schools also must develop high-quality video classes and tools that universities can share through the network.

"The really hard thing is to take the kind of education that we do in classrooms and turn it into the kind of education that we do for someone sitting in front of a screen," said Gregory Jackson, chief information officer at the University of Chicago.