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## **CollegeNET ends the thick/thin letter game**

By Christopher Dawson

Do you remember the waiting game after you'd applied to college? Checking the mail every day, waiting for that letter? Would it be thick or thin? Because everyone knew that a thin letter would read somewhere along the lines of "We regret to inform you that you do not meet the criteria for acceptance at XYZ University; we wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors." Of course it was thin; it only takes one sheet of paper to reject you.

A thick envelope, on the other hand, was a very good sign. Thick envelopes contained information about dorms, course catalogs, freshman core requirements, computer purchase programs, and the like. They also tended to contain a cheery letter welcoming you to the ABC University community!

This time-honored tradition of mail watching, though, seems to be nearing an end. Universities are increasingly embracing electronic means for informing students of their acceptance or rejection. Emails can be neither thick, nor thin, I'm afraid.

As was the case for the University of California, San Diego, this past March, the move to electronic communications hasn't been completely smooth. As NBC San Diego reported,

...the school's communications office said an e-mail was sent Monday afternoon to all 46,377 students who applied for admission — including the 29,000 rejects — welcoming them to the campus.

A half-hour later, school officials said, they realized their mistake. Almost two hours after the first note went out, a second e-mail was sent, apologizing to 28,889 freshmen applicants for the mistake.

That's worse than getting a thick envelope with a rejection letter inside.

[CollegeNET](#), however, seems to have built a web-based solution for managing the entire admissions process that is quite a bit more robust than a massive email blast. According to the CollegeNET website,

CollegeNET, Inc. is the world's leading 'virtual plumber' for higher education internet transactions. We provide here for your convenience over 1500 customized Internet admissions applications built for college and university programs.

I had the opportunity this afternoon to speak with Patricia Summer, Vice-President of Marketing for CollegeNET, about their efforts and, in particular, their work with James Madison University to fully automate the admissions process this year. Interestingly, CollegeNET has been around since 1977 in some form or another. They began as a company called Universal Algorithms and produced scheduling software for universities.

Today, they still produce university-level scheduling applications, but also run ApplyWeb, among [other enterprises](#). Roughly 550 universities currently use ApplyWeb and the customized sites CollegeNET builds around the web-based application to manage at least some aspect of their admission processes, whether online applications, application tracking, or acceptance notification.

CollegeNET, however, came to my attention because James Madison was the first to use a full complement of their technologies to announce all of their 2009-2010 admission decisions electronically. In fact, JMU used workflow technologies within CollegeNET's customer resource management software, in conjunction with ApplyWeb to notify over 20,000 applicants.

To avoid problems like those encountered at UCSD, CollegeNET's applications actually grant students access to a web portal, through which the admissions process can be tracked and decisions are announced. The email blast is abandoned, in favor of an interactive approach over which the university has control throughout the process. Thus, students don't see their decisions until a thorough review of the database driving the portal has been completed; similarly, the university can update the information in the portal even after the fact and facilitate ongoing communications with new freshmen.

This is 2009. I suppose the old thick or thin letter game is a bit of an anachronism, but I can't help but be a bit nostalgic for the way we received our acceptance and rejection letters in the olden days. However, the trees saved and the efficiencies realized with a system like CollegeNET's more than make up for my nostalgia. As Joe Manning, associate director of admissions for James Madison University, noted,

Our admissions officers are using time that would have been spent distributing acceptance letters for reviewing applications and reaching out to prospective students.