Rewiring needed

NJEdge expects a public-private partnership to improve infrastructure in southern New Jersey

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NJEdge is planning a public-private partnership to help Southern New Jersey by investing in fiber optic technology.

Samuel Conn is the president and CEO of NJEdge, a nonprofit, member-supported technology services provider that serves colleges, research organizations and health care organizations. "I am particularly concerned with the southern part of New Jersey because the infrastructure is not in place down there to adequately provide the amount of bandwidth we need to promote economic development, research, and education," Conn said.

"Right now if you want more bandwidth, you have to negotiate another contract," Conn said.

The last-mile initiative should benefit NJEdge members. "We have this incredible optical fiber network backbone that runs regionally. Our institutions connect into that," Conn said. "We want to get a fiber connection that is owned by our membership that connects them through to our backbone. Then we do not have to negotiate last-mile connectivity."

NJEdge was founded in 1999 by the New Jersey President's Council, which represents the state's public, private and community colleges and universities. The membership realized the internet was essential to economic growth, Conn said.

"We have become highly dependent on the internet over the last 20 years," Conn said. "Fifteen or 20 years ago, if you came to work and someone told you 'the internet is down today' you would say 'So what?' Now everyone's dysfunctional and they do not know how to work [without the internet]."

Keeping them home

NJEdge is also creating pathways for New Jersey college graduates to stay in New Jersey and work, rather than move to Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York or Connecticut.

"Competency-based learning is trending in higher education," Conn said. "It means that if you have specific skills and competencies, you have the ability to demonstrate those, be evaluated on those, and receive academic credit for those. It's an acknowledgement that learning comes in different forms. Not all learning occurs in the classroom. You may have learning that you have picked up through experiential learning or through military training or through certifications and credentials or those types of things."

Advancements in educational technology support new pedagogical styles, Conn said. "Teaching management systems have evolved," he noted. "They are no longer this monolithic architecture where everything is self-contained in the application. They are more open systems now where you can integrate third-party components into it and have things for testing and have things for validation of references. You have all kinds of third-party tools."

Conn praised educational institutions for their outreach efforts. "They establish really good relationships," he said. "They are innovative. The problem is keeping pace. College students today ask very different questions than they did 10 years ago. They ask 'How is your Wifi connection? Do you have enough bandwidth to support all my mobile devices? Do you have a mobile app so I can search and add classes? Can I have chat sessions with my advisor as opposed to going to their office?'" College students are making decisions based on these questions, Conn said.

Older students are the fastest-growing group, Conn said. They are supporting spouses and children, while paying mortgages, he noted.

County College of Morris President Tony Iacono serves on NJEdge's board of directors. He said there is very little NJEdge does that is not technology-infused or technology-integrated.

"If you go back a decade, schools were running software off their servers," Iacono said. "NJEdge helps schools to run more efficiently. We made a huge switch from conventional technology. It changes the way we operate with lower costs than in the past."

Iacono is also looking five or 10 years down the road. "Governor Murphy's last-mile scholarship is a big challenge. We want to make sure students have the resources they need. The state is highly aware. A lot of Jersey is rural. Will they have the same opportunities?

"We talk about infrastructure," Iacono said. "Students are learning differently. We offer students online databases to do research."

Iacono observes that the Morris County library is busy even on Friday afternoon. He estimated that many more students are connected virtually to the library from other locations.

"We need to ensure that the state has expanded capabilities for expanded opportunities," Iacono said.

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