

Communications project online with Kan-ed goals

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Not only does linking the Neosho County Community College, city offices, USD 413 and the library along a community-wide fiber optic network realize a long-term goal of the city of Chanute's, it is one step closer to Kan-ed realizing connectivity across the state.

Kan-ed, created by the Kansas Legislature and administered through the Kansas Board of Regents, works to expand collaborative capabilities of Kansas' public and private K-12 schools, higher education institutions, libraries and hospitals.

Kan-ed provides a private network to which institutions may connect for video collaboration and data sharing, not unlike the possibilities that may be realized with Chanute's network.

That is why representatives at Kan-ed are excited that Chanute has taken an initiative that coincides with its vision.

"Our vision is one to enhance human and personal relationships and to coordinate the best we can through appropriate use of the network," Hal Gardner, Kan-ed executive director, said. "We really try to emphasize what can be done that couldn't be done if the network hadn't been there."

Connectivity has become the key word in Chanute concerning the city-wide network. While a lot of the focus and controversy has been on Internet service, Ben Smith, dean of planning and operations at NCCC, said that wasn't even a blimp on the horizon when they started talking about the network. The network will lend many other capabilities, such as sharing e-mail servers, resources and information among institutions in town, and with the help of Kan-ed, across the state.

The opportunities that Chanute entities saw with the network included a high speed direct connection that would allow the college and USD 413 to connect to Kan-ed, and therefore other educational and public institutions.

"It opens up a direct communication," Smith said. "Look at the possibility of actually working back and forth with classes between college and school."

The Chanute and Kan-ed networks also present the possibility of video conferencing allowing college instructors to only teach at one building instead of traveling back and forth. Smith believes this will benefit class dynamics.



Noretta Lawrence, Neosho County Community College network services coordinator, addresses issues with NCCC's online campus software Friday afternoon.

"That interaction can make or break a class," he said. "Class interaction could be increased with connection."

To help pay for the transition to the fiber optic network, the college wrote a grant last month to Kan-ed to contribute \$25,000 for technology infrastructure equipment. NCCC is prepared to match the funds from its technology budget. Smith knows the money is well worth it.

"Will it cost money? Yes. Will it save money? Yes. Will it increase the educational possibilities? Yes. That's what we're here for," he said.

NCCC was successful in gaining a Kan-ed grant in the past for video and audio conferencing equipment that runs over the Internet. This allowed connectivity between Erie, Chanute and Ottawa high schools, eliminated redundant lines and has the potential to save \$3,600 dollars a year.

However, funding for Kan-ed is reaching a sunset provision in Legislature on June 30, 2005, threatening to end the \$10 million spent annually for the network. Gardner explained that the Board of Regents has put forth legislation that would extend funding to June 2008 to keep funds coming from the Kansas Universal Service Fund, fees that are collected from telephone services.

That could mean that funding for NCCC and other entities could be affected.

"There's always a danger," Gardner said. To aid in the process, Kan-ed is asking all of its membership in hospitals, libraries and schools to speak out to the Legislature.

"We've asked them if they have good stories that they want to tell, let the Legislature know," Gardner said. "We hope that those stories will be positive."

Gardner said it could be April before Kan-ed receives a decision on funding.

Despite Kan-ed funding uncertainty, NCCC is moving along with the project without fear. Smith feels the network will make the whole community attractive and NCCC more attractive to perspective students.

And not just students who want to come to Chanute.

"We can start offering classes through cable TV, to Erie, to Thayer. There's a lot of possibilities," Smith said.

Linking onto the city-wide network and onto Kan-ed will allow NCCC to start looking at new class options.

"We're moving forward in on-line Internet based courses," NCCC President Vicky Smith, Ed.D., said. With a bigger pipeline in which to send out information to students, she said the college will be able to do more with sophisticated online graphics and pictures, as opposed to just text.

"I think the students are really going to be helped," she said.

There are currently eight courses offered online at NCCC. Vicky Smith said the college plans to have 12- to 15 by next fall, and to keep adding two or three courses each semester, ranging from nursing to music appreciation.

These classes are a realization to the college's mission to offer access to higher education by reducing barriers, two of the biggest being time and distance.

"With on-line courses, you are able to take the course at your convenience, as opposed to the college's convenience," she said. "A lot of adults can't make it to day classes."

The NCCC president anticipates that the college will be able to tap into the city's broad band that will be installed from 14th Street to the college this spring.

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