

Super-high-speed Internet access could be business lure

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A proposal by Northern Illinois University to bring super-high-speed Internet access to the Chicago area also could be an incentive to lure more technology companies to the region.

"A dedicated high-speed research network could open doors to other entities," NIU President John Peters said during a press conference Wednesday. The college unveiled NIUNet, a dedicated Internet research network capable of delivering speeds up to 1 gigabyte per second, nearly 1,000 times faster than most broadband connections available to homes and businesses today.

Much of the infrastructure to deliver Internet access speeds of NIUNet already is in place around the Chicago area, Peters said. The service only is meant for research purposes, but it may be possible to piggyback access for residential and business services down the road.

While broadband access is widely available in the Chicago area, speeds offered by NIUNet could benefit economic development programs around the region.

"High-tech firms could find it attractive," Peters said. "Lack of high-speed access does make it difficult to attract research companies that need that kind of speed."

Robert Gleeson, director of the Center for Governmental Studies at NIU, said creating NIUNet will help ensure that northern Illinois remains a player in the global marketplace.

He said the core of the global economy today is the ability of companies to facilitate creativity in their people.

That means that there is a distinct advantage in having employees around the world so that they can bring different viewpoints to the creative process, Gleeson said. But to do this efficiently, it requires high-speed networks like NIUNet.

For example, research and development in manufacturing would greatly benefit, Gleeson said. Engineers around the world would be able to simultaneously access computer-aided design files, working together in a way that closely approximates the benefits of face-to-face interaction.

Because CAD files would be accessible via NIUNet, it would reduce travel costs for those engineers.

Offering high-speed connectivity has benefited many Asian countries, Gleeson said.

"Singapore for example has become a technology center because they do offer very high-speed access, so we know it's an effective lure," he said. "This kind of connectivity will allow our small and midsize manufacturers to remain competitive and keep jobs from being outsourced outside the U.S."