

# A community college enables students to continue their education in challenging times with free in-home connectivity

## Northeastern Technical College finds a partner who helps make higher education accessible to rural communities during a pandemic — and beyond

The South Carolina counties of Chesterfield, Marlboro and Dillon are as rural as rural gets. Two-lane roads, many of which are unpaved, connect small, far-flung towns. Shopping centers are few and far between, and Dillon County is just about to get its very first Starbucks. The area's rural feel is amplified by the 46,000 acre Sand Hills State Forest in Chesterfield County, which grows pine trees for the paper industry. The average income falls below the national poverty rate, and many residents depend upon public transportation to get to work and access healthcare and other critical services.

Against this backdrop lies Northeastern Technical College (NETC), a four-campus public community college that offers occupational, technical, college transfer, basic academic skills and continuing education programs to the region's adult residents and high school students. NETC believes deeply in the impact higher education can have on the community at large, and is on a mission to make education accessible and affordable to as many people as possible in the counties it serves, where 93 percent of residents don't hold associate or bachelor's degrees.

When Dr. Kyle Wagner joined NETC as president in 2016, he decided to implement a student-centered approach that puts students and their needs first, and builds programs and processes around those needs. And he knew that for his students to succeed, the school had to address the barriers associated with economic status, transportation and childcare. Wagner believed the solution to overcoming these barriers was technology delivered over a reliable network to enable off-campus learning anytime and anywhere.

NETC already had a remote learning program in place, but Wagner built a multi-year plan to expand its scope. "The degrees, certifications and education offered by Northeastern Technical College can be a first step toward a higher-paying career," he says. "But for too many potential students, easy access to education was holding them back from these opportunities. We were committed to changing that."

In March 2020, the school's remote learning expansion plan suddenly accelerated when South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster issued a directive to close college campuses because of COVID-19. Internet access



NETC believes barriers to education can be overcome with remote learning programs supported by a reliable network.

### Client profile



**NORTHEASTERN**  
— TECHNICAL COLLEGE —

### Company

Northeastern Technical College

### Industry

Education

## Overview

- When COVID-19 closed campuses, Northeastern Technical College had to immediately switch to a remote learning model
- Finding that only 30 percent of students had Internet access, NETC partnered with Spectrum Enterprise to deliver high-speed Internet to serviceable homes at no cost to the students

## Outcomes

- Students with at-home Internet access rose from 30 to 55 percent for summer 2020, and the school is targeting 85 percent for fall 2020
- Student enrollment increased by more than 20 percent year over year
- Student textbook costs were reduced by enabling use of open educational resources

## Why it matters

- Students that would otherwise have had to halt their education were able to continue their studies
- With a scalable and easy-to-administer program, NETC can offer more flexible education options to more students
- Underserved community members with limited access to transportation and childcare can more easily improve their lives through education

“Spectrum Enterprise is a great partner. Everything they said they could do, they made happen. It’s been a terrific relationship.”

— Dr. Kyle Wagner, president



When the pandemic hit, NETC worked with longtime ally SCI-Premier Solutions to discover Spectrum Enterprise as a reliable technology partner who could help ensure every student had the connectivity required to continue their studies from home.

for every single student was suddenly an urgent need. NETC staff mobilized quickly and chose to collaborate with Spectrum Enterprise to provide a 100 percent remote learning environment. It was the beginning of a partnership that is now giving NETC students — and the community at-large — a leg up in the world.

### As a plan forms, a partner is needed

The challenges were seemingly insurmountable: The school surveyed its students and found out that only 30 percent of them had access to high-speed Internet in their homes or the means to pay for it.

Wagner tapped Mamie Harris, the school’s longtime consultant and owner of the education consultancy SCI-Premier Solutions, LLC. For years, she’s helped the college develop strategies and process improvements to address the needs of unserved students within the community and connect them to higher education.

Together, they identified and analyzed where students live across the three counties NETC serves. Then they

overlaid Internet service providers, mapping out the availability of more than 500 student home addresses to determine which were serviceable.

What they found was that Spectrum Enterprise would be able to provide connectivity to many of the students through its existing service area. While Spectrum Enterprise met this initial requirement, Wagner knew the school needed a partner built to help organizations execute on their vision and work quickly, so he brought a local Spectrum Enterprise team to the table to determine if they were the right fit.

### A strong vision sets a plan in motion

During initial meetings with the Spectrum Enterprise team, Wagner communicated his vision for a connectivity program that would be provided at no cost to students

“We have been working so closely that it feels like Spectrum Enterprise is an extension of the college.”

— Mamie Harris, NETC consultant



NETC president Dr. Kyle Wagner plans to make Internet services and distance learning permanent offerings for students.

through a grant, donations and other sources. The program needed to be supported by a technology solution that could deliver the reliable connectivity required to provide live online classes, course replays and any necessary tutoring from students' homes.

"We didn't want to take away from that face-to-face feeling of the classroom," says Wagner. "Our students use videoconferencing applications to collaborate on projects, and we needed a solution that would enable that." And, Wagner stressed to the team, the connectivity solution needed to be easy for students to implement and administer themselves.

NETC and Spectrum Enterprise moved quickly to design a program that would enable the school to provide high-speed broadband connectivity directly to every serviceable student home. "By listening and understanding NETC's challenges, we came together to determine how Spectrum Enterprise could best serve the college and its student population," says Kristin Perkinson, Spectrum Enterprise strategic account specialist.

### A program that sets NETC and its students up for success

Together, NETC and Spectrum Enterprise created a program in which each participating student receives equipment for broadband Internet with download speeds up to 200 Mbps in his or her home.

Each student is provided with simple installation instructions along with a toll-free number for Spectrum Enterprise technical support in case help is needed during installation, or at any other time. Students unable to get the equipment working after calling technical support can request that a Spectrum Enterprise support specialist come to their home.

Tight collaboration between NETC and Spectrum Enterprise enabled the program to launch in just three weeks. "Spectrum Enterprise is a great partner. We were pretty demanding because we knew exactly what the student was going to need," says Wagner. "Everything they said they could do, they made happen. It's been a terrific relationship."

Harris also felt Spectrum Enterprise became a part of the team. "We have been working so closely that it feels like Spectrum Enterprise is an extension of the college."

Today, students attend classes that are livestreamed through videoconferencing applications, and they're able to review them later through recordings as needed. They're also able to virtually collaborate on group projects and meet with tutors.

Student response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive since launch, and they've found benefits to connectivity they didn't expect. NETC found the average student spends \$900 annually on textbooks. Now, many courses can be supported with open educational resources,

which are available for free online. But more importantly, the program has changed their outlook. "Most of our students thought having Internet access in their homes was a luxury. Now they're saying it's a necessity," says Wagner.

For the school, the mission was to bring connectivity to student homes so students would have access to more education, training and opportunities. However, the institution has also realized another benefit. The new program has increased enrollment 26 percent over last summer, says Wagner.

NETC plans to make Internet services and remote learning permanent offerings for students. "Even when we're allowed to come back on campus, we'll be utilizing distance learning," says Wagner. "And if we want to address poverty, if we want to help people improve their lives, that access to education is key."

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### About Spectrum Enterprise

Spectrum Enterprise, a part of Charter Communications, Inc., is a national provider of scalable, fiber technology solutions serving America's largest businesses and communications service providers. The broad Spectrum Enterprise portfolio includes networking and managed services solutions: Internet access, Ethernet access and networks, Voice and TV solutions. Spectrum Enterprise's industry-leading team of experts works closely with clients to achieve greater business success by providing solutions designed to meet their evolving needs. More information about Spectrum Enterprise can be found at [enterprise.spectrum.com](https://enterprise.spectrum.com).

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