

NEC Display Solutions for Higher Education

In a world that's becoming increasingly fast-paced, on-demand and interconnected, going digital is a necessary transition for today's campus. But it's hard to know where to begin. With so many options and so many changes in the digital marketplace, researching and deciding on the right visual display solution costs you time and money in and of itself. Instead, you can take advantage of the knowledge and resources of NEC's higher education experts, who are well equipped to tailor a display system designed specifically to meet the growing needs of colleges and universities. Using this guide, you can prepare yourself with some common questions and issues to consider when starting a conversation about digital signage systems.

How does a university benefit from a digital signage system?

Informs your students. Bulletin board messages are all too often lost among the clutter. Not only that — students are already burdened with reams of information, from event calendars, to class notices, to recruiter visits. With digital signage positioned in key gathering places, you're able to efficiently and effectively get important messages to your student body, whether it be emergency bulletins or real-time weather and traffic conditions.

Informs your visitors. Strategic placement in heavy traffic areas such as the student union or admissions office can help communicate to your prospective students and guests. Interactive components like touchscreen kiosks can be useful in wayfinding; if a visitor wants to find out how to get from the food court to the dorms, they can stop to print a map illustrating a direct path.

Reinforces your brand image. Digital signage can power your school's brand with a consistent message while also elevating the overall perception of your school. Prospective students touring the campus will be impressed by how the university leverages technology. Mascots, logos and your accompanying color palettes are presented in optimal, true form. The color and image accuracy of professional-grade LCD screens, combined with NEC's award-winning SpectraViewII™ technology, far surpasses the varying reproduction quality of printed signage. Additionally, viewers are able to interact with your school identity using a digital medium on all sensory levels, adding to the overall experience. You have the flexibility of using photo images, movie files, or even relevant news feeds. School spirit has never been so alive.

Generates extra revenue. Digital signage can offer many fund-raising opportunities, particularly among alumni and local business partners. Many universities choose to sell naming rights to displays, just as any other classroom or stadium-naming opportunity.

Saves on costs. Static posters and banners are costly to replace over time, especially if you want your content to remain relevant and interesting to your audience. Going digital saves a step in the production process by going straight from the design phase to live display. To further help your budget, NEC offers its Total Trade™ removal and recycling program, which updates your outdated technology equipment with the latest NEC displays. The trade includes regulatory-compliant removal of industrial waste and the paperwork process of verifying it — saving you not only unexpected costs but also time.

Helps reduce your environmental impact. Digital signage is an immediate solution to reducing your overall usage of paper, ink and plastics. NEC displays are not only recyclable, but also contain less hazardous materials. In partnering with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), NEC has become very active in developing policies and guidelines to create a more environmentally conscious industry.

Reaches your network's full potential. Simply by using your campus' wireless network, you can set up and control your entire display system from a single point of access — whether it's multiple screens within the student union or screens across all college gathering areas. Program when your displays turn on and off according to peak times or facility hours. The system is also equipped with self-monitoring software to prevent black screens, checking for those in need of maintenance and automatically sending an e-mail to the support team.

Initial concerns when considering a digital signage system:

This will be too expensive. Financing options are available with attractive pricing, terms and delivery options. You could also consider entering an NEC-sponsored pilot program that tests how a potential system would work in a few key locations before being rolled out across the entire campus network. In a pilot program, NEC absorbs part or all of the initial hardware, software and installation costs for the pilot location(s). Once the system has proved itself, NEC can help roll out the digital signage solution to the rest of your facilities.

This will be too difficult. While a learning curve is expected, in-person and online tutorials are available to prepare your staff for the transition. Web logins make it easy for you to make changes from any location, while service support is available 24/7. NEC can bring coordinated deployment services to ensure deadlines are met, and if possible, with minimum impact on the school environment. Your project management team will be able to move the effort forward from start to finish with periodic updates and installation status reports. NEC also serves as your liaison among union trades to coordinate the installation of electrical outlets, low voltage wiring and network infrastructure. Very minimal workload is asked of the university staff.

How would I keep content fresh? Your marketing department is currently using the same content creation tools as those used to “feed” the digital signage network. With digital signs, you can dynamically change the content, increasing the ROI on the same content. For schools without access to content assets, NEC can help create digital marketing messaging at a monthly fee. Templates can be created to custom-fit your branding guidelines and provide you with an even easier way to update information. It’s important to realize that content can make or break your digital signage system, so a dedication to content renewal needs to be established early on.

Do I try for a global system? In some cases, the colleges within a university have adapted to their own network systems with no standardization among the schools. To best maximize your digital signage system, you will need to establish a universal standard that all the colleges will need to adhere by so that there are no varying points of access and management complications.

There’s too many options. Which do I choose? There are several scenarios to consider: is your display system customized and networked to offer the flexibility to grow with your university’s needs, or does it only offer you a package deal that’s good enough for today? Is it done through one point of contact, or are there several vendors to contract separately? Do they offer expertise specific to your field of work, or are you their first higher education customer? The easiest solution for any situation is to deal with a “one stop shop” like NEC, offering total customized solutions through one point of contact.

What are some general digital display solutions for universities?

Though some visual display companies may try to convince you otherwise, there is no single “out of the box” solution. Each college or university may have their own unique set of challenges and revenue-producing goals. Smaller, private schools will have minimal needs in comparison to public schools sprawling with sports facilities, auditoriums and student housing.

If you’re looking for a simple way to translate traditional signage into a digital medium, consider a basic flash memory-based media player (like an industrial DVD player). If you’re intending to gain feedback and data from your student body, consider a networked kiosk. If you just want to create a “wow-factor” among visitors and recruits, consider a video wall to play live TV and music videos. Solutions can vary in complexity according to the size of your facilities, budget and IT comfort level. That’s why it helps to have a custom-built system that meets your basic needs today, but prepares you for tomorrow’s growth.

Beyond your hardware components, you’ll also be deciding on a network solution to support your displays:

A SaaS(ASP) Network is an external server that resides outside of your school’s network. While you own the hardware, you only have to subscribe to the software. No maintenance is required on your part. Access is done through a browser-based user interface. SaaS/ASP is preferred when you have a tight timeline (one-day turnaround), a smaller budget, or have limited bandwidth and IT staff to handle day-to-day maintenance.

A LAN/WAN Network is an internal server that resides within your school’s network and firewall. You own both the hardware and the software, allowing for complete customization (such as designing interactive kiosk data retrieval). Access is done through a browser-based user interface. LAN/WAN is preferred when your existing company network requires firewall protection, or when your displays demand more sophisticated software writing.

What are some challenges NEC might face with universities?

Upfront costs are too high. NEC can offer the most basic systems, usually built around a simple flash-based media player (such as an industrial DVD player). These systems are networked so that more sophisticated components can be added later on when the dealer is ready.

IT department is overburdened. Many times the university’s IT department will balk at the thought of a new networked system to maintain; fortunately, NEC offers 24/7 service, in-system maintenance checks, and user-friendly tutorials within the software. Also, with a web-based model, multiple-user contribution is encouraged and facilitated, as access can be made through any browser. The marketing department is able control content on their own, and IT doesn’t have to be bothered.

Competitor offers lower-cost solution. While it may look attractive on paper, these kinds of “boxed” solutions offer no customization or room for system growth. What you are saving today will end up costing you tomorrow, as you will be replacing your entire set of hardware as needs change, rather than adapting your current system to change.

Bureaucracy of state-funded schools. Public schools often follow bureaucratic purchasing procedures that require complex bids. More often than not, they favor the lowest price over more comprehensive solutions.

What are some qualifying questions to ask?

Current Equipment/Platform

What kind of signage do you currently use?
What kind of content is on playing on your screens?
Do you know what digital signage is?
How big a part does digital signage play in your marketing plan?
Are you currently working with a digital signage provider?

Budget

How much money do you spend per year on your marketing (static signs, ads)?
Has a budget been set aside for digital signage?
How many systems would you need per college/building?

Usage

What are your intended goals with a digital signage system?
How will you use the technology? (Promote events, enrollment or build school spirit?)
Will you need to retrieve data and feedback from your students and faculty?

Integration

How quickly do you need to deploy?
Would you prefer start-to-finish project management or working with your own vendors?
What screen sizes did you have in mind?
Do you prefer wall- or ceiling-mounted screens?

Operation

Who will be managing the system's day-to-day operation?
Who is responsible for content?

Image Quality

Would you like high definition-quality playback?
Do you have high-quality videos and photos?
Are you interested in RSS news feeds that crawl across screen?
Do you need to show regular TV programming?

Network Requirements

What kind of IT infrastructure do you currently have?
Do you currently have an IT department?
Do you use a WAN/LAN?
Do you currently have a wireless network?
Do you have any bandwidth restrictions?
Does your server need to reside inside your firewall?
Can the system reside within your network, or will it require a dedicated network?



What are the steps in creating a digital display solution?

Project Kickoff

1. Project kickoff. Your NEC representative will meet with key decision makers to assess several factors — timeline, ROI model, budget, and generally, what your needs and expectations are for your digital signage system. In collaboration with manufacturing partners, NEC develops a tailored, end-to-end solution, which is reviewed and approved among all involved parties, such as your college Deans, IT and media department, procurement department, campus security, and student affairs director.

2. Project deployment. NEC acts as a general contractor in placing orders with vendors, scheduling installations, securing insurance, and finalizing any application/content requirements among your IT and marketing departments. A site survey is performed to determine the best placements for your digital signage — how foot traffic flows, key gathering points, proper infrastructure, electrical and outdoor issues. Upon final approval from the key decision

Project Deployment

Pilot Assessment

makers, the first set of systems are shipped to your location. After system installation, testing and equipment inspection, your staff is trained and tutorials are created as needed.

3. Pilot assessment. If you've chosen to go through with a pilot program, this is when you start receiving feedback from students and faculty. An ROI analysis is performed, and a timeline is created for additional deployments, as well as any enhancements to the current system. The effectiveness of the project is continually monitored, and when results are hitting targets, your remaining sites take the full move into deployment stage.

4. Ongoing evaluation. A maintenance plan is built to fit your particular needs and budget. Your NEC representative is continually in contact with you to provide any support or help with troubleshooting the system.

Ongoing Evaluation

Why choose NEC?

With NEC, you're equipped with a total solutions package — from diagnostics and implementation to follow-up service and support. Through one point of contact, you have access to the highest quality technology, superior vendors, and an unrivaled industry-specific service team. No one is more committed to your needs, and no one else offers full complimentary consultations.

Unlike competitors, NEC doesn't just offer one solution that's either too big or too small for your current environment. Instead, NEC cost-effectively maximizes the system you start with, equipping it with network capabilities that are ready to grow when you are. Evaluating your unique situation is a hugely important part of the NEC solution process, and can make the most of your investment.

Most importantly, NEC is an industry leader with a longstanding commitment to quality service, product and expertise. There is unparalleled value in working with a global household name, since you can trust that you will be taken care of throughout the lifetime of your digital signage system — and possibly beyond, as the relationship evolves at the rate of technological innovation.