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21 ICN upgrades will help UNI

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CEDAR FALLS — A planned \$16.2 million upgrade to the Iowa Communication Network is expected to help the University of Northern Iowa grow its distance and online learning programs.

Last week President Barack Obama announced 66 new American Recovery and Reinvestment Act broadband projects that will receive \$795 million in grants and loans. The grants have been matched by more than \$200 million in outside investments. About \$90 million will come to Iowa.

The ICN is a 3,000-mile fiber-optic telecommunications network that provides voice, video, data, WAN connections and Internet service to schools, universities, hospitals, government buildings, National Guard armories and libraries across the state. Kent Johnson, UNI's interim dean of continuing and distance education, said the expanded broadband network means the university can now reach otherwise geographically isolated locations with distance education opportunities.

"We are the largest user of the ICN video in the state of Iowa," Johnson said. "... Most of the activity we do using the ICN network is credit courses toward a degree program. We also do some professional development activities around campus."

The university currently offers about 130 ICN courses each year. Increasing that program is one of Provost Gloria Gibson's top priorities and in the Iowa Board of Regents strategic plan.

Other Iowa businesses getting grants are Iowa Health Systems, \$17.7 million; Farmer's Telephone Co. of Riceville, \$18.7 million; Grand River Mutual Telephone Corp., \$9.3 million; Ellsworth Cooperative Telephone Association, \$5.3 million; Breda Telephone Corp, \$2.6 million; and Grand River Mutual Telephone Corp., \$20.3 million.

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