Founded in 1891, Meredith College is a private women's liberal arts college with coeducational graduate programs in Raleigh, North Carolina. The nationally ranked college serves a student body of over 2,000 people and provides 90 majors, minors, and academic programs in addition to graduate programs. Meredith College aims to teach students how to enhance their strengths, broaden their perspectives, and prepare for lives of impact and distinction.

Launching a Network Modernization Program
Five years ago, Meredith College's legacy network vendor changed its pricing structure. Jeff Howlett, the school's Chief Information Officer (CIO) explains: “Our vendor had effectively priced itself out of our market. That was our initial motivation to look for alternative systems.”

In addition, many of the college's aging legacy systems were struggling to meet the demands being placed on them. “Our switches were long past their best,” says Doug Alm, Senior Network Engineer at Meredith College. “Every time we upgrade network equipment, we also increase our PoE [Power over Ethernet] requirements. However, our switches were increasingly unable to meet these requirements.”

Doug Alm has overseen Meredith College's network for over 30 years and is now due to retire. That was also an upcoming challenge for the institution. “Doug knows all the buildings and the network technologies. He knows how different vendor systems interoperate and is therefore able to successfully manage the network. Transferring all that knowledge would not be easy, so we decided to consolidate our network technologies onto a single vendor platform,” comments Howlett.

Finally, security was a key factor when upgrading its network systems. Higher education institutions face a range of security threats, including phishing attacks and ransomware. “The situation is different in colleges than in enterprises,” says Howlett, “our biggest threat is likely from within campus due to the extreme increase in connected devices, which brings more infected devices to identify and secure. And although we must do what we can to protect the network, we also need to enable students to access the resources they need to flourish. That means being much more open than in a typical enterprise IT environment.”

Partnering with Fortinet
Meredith College's partnership with Fortinet began when Doug Alm visited a local trade show arranged by a reseller that the college had partnered with. A Fortinet representative presented an overview of the Fortinet Security Fabric at the show, and Alm was impressed. “That show sparked my interest in Fortinet as a potential partner, and relatively quickly we put in place the FortiGate Next-Generation Firewalls as our firewall solution.”

“The customer care and service support offered by Fortinet is unlike anything we see with any other technology company we work with and was one of the main drivers behind us becoming a complete Fortinet campus.”

– Jeff Howlett, Chief Information Officer, Meredith College

Details
Customer: Meredith College
Industry: Education
Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Business Impact
- Network management and security simplified by consolidating with the Fortinet Security Fabric
- Much lower total cost of ownership compared to legacy system
- Enhanced security posture through greater visibility
The college’s positive experience with the FortiGate NGFWs meant that Fortinet came up for consideration shortly thereafter when Meredith College needed a new core switch in its data center. “By the time we realized we needed a broader network modernization program, we were already Fortinet customers, so it was natural that we should consider consolidating on the Fortinet Security Fabric,” explains Howlett.

Before it did so, the college carried out an extensive survey of the marketplace. Fortinet came out head and shoulders above competing solutions. “Fortinet was the obvious choice,” says Howlett, “it offers the single vendor approach we require and has a great value proposition. Importantly, it also appreciated the midsize market more than its competitors, which tend to be set up only to support large enterprises.”

**Consolidating with the Fortinet Security Fabric**

Today, Meredith College has consolidated its networking technologies with the Fortinet Security Fabric. Across its 35 buildings and 45 wiring closets, the college deployed FortiGate NGFWs and FortiSwitches in its campus and core networks. As part of the data center refresh, the college is introducing active standby failover to increase resilience and uptime.

The college is boosting its endpoint security through the FortiClient Fabric Agent, which it installed on all college-owned devices to provide a virtual private network (VPN) and antivirus. The college also installed 600 FortiFone Internet Protocol (IP) phones along with FortiVoice Secured Unified Communications, which empower clear communications and efficient collaboration within the campus.

Meredith College had augmented its FortiGate NGFWs with the FortiGuard AI-powered Security Services Unified Threat Protection (UTP) Bundle.

**First-Class Support and Partnership**

Right from the outset, Meredith College has benefitted from the highest levels of support and service from Fortinet. “The initial sales team went above and beyond my expectations,” explains Howlett, “and that level of support has continued with every Fortinet employee with whom we have worked. The customer care and service support offered by Fortinet is unlike anything we see with any other technology company we work with and was one of the main drivers behind us becoming a complete Fortinet campus.”

Howlett went on to explain that it is obvious that Fortinet invests in its people, given the low levels of turnover compared to other technology companies. “With most vendors, we do not know who is going to support us from one day to the next. With Fortinet on the other hand, we have been able to grow strong relationships with the same team of people every time we have contact. Fortinet delivers that true definition of partnership that vendors often talk about, but which you rarely see in reality.”

Alm agrees that the partnership is a strong one: “There is more follow-through from Fortinet than with some of our other vendors. Pre-sales teams often promise much in terms of local support but deliver little. That has not been the case with Fortinet.”

**Ease of Management**

Across all the Fortinet solutions it has deployed to date, Meredith College has experienced significant improvements in manageability compared to its legacy systems. The FortiVoice solution is a good example, providing the team with much simpler administration and better visibility across locations than the previous telephony solution.

Jeff Howlett explains: “We have a tremendous number of regular changes on the campus, whether that is employees coming and going, or students moving to new rooms. Updating directories and phone numbers was a significant task with our old system, but FortiVoice makes it much easier.”
Major hardware or software upgrades used to mean that specialists from the phone vendor needed to come into the college to oversee the changes, a significant addition to the total cost of the system. With FortiVoice in place, hardware and software upgrades are so quick and easy to make from an intuitive web portal that the college can manage them in-house, saving time and costs.

The simplification of network management tasks is important in light of Alm's impending retirement. “Using the FortiGate NGFWs with the FortiOS operating system as a management platform is much easier than relying on the command prompt,” says Alm. “That will be a significant help to the team who will be taking over the network management when I leave.”

### Protecting the College While Lowering Costs

By consolidating with the Fortinet Security Fabric, Meredith College also enhances its security posture. “Being able to manage the FortiSwitches through the FortiGate NGFW management pane gives us much greater visibility into where potential problems are,” says Alm.

As Alm puts it: “Increasing our protection was the first reason we decided to work with Fortinet. It was clear from day one that our security would be in a better place using the FortiGate NGFWs than sticking with our existing vendor.”

For Howlett, one of the main benefits of Fortinet from a security perspective is that it leverages machine learning and artificial intelligence capabilities to protect against threats. “One of the main reasons we decided to consolidate into one vendor is to take advantage of advanced data-driven systems that coordinate together in a cybersecurity mesh architecture. The Fortinet Security Fabric will provide us with a unified, automated security platform that shares intelligence rather than divided up amongst specialized products.”

Another significant benefit of the Fortinet Security Fabric is that it delivers a much lower total cost of ownership (TCO) than the college’s legacy system. Howlett comments: “Fortinet delivers much higher value per dollar. For instance, the total cost of the entire FortiVoice installation was the same as our legacy provider proposed we pay for just one phase of the project.”

### Extending into the Security Fabric

To realize its vision for a cybersecurity mesh network, Meredith College is investing in additional Fortinet solutions including over 800 FortiAPs (access points) for secure and high-performing Wi-Fi across campus. Once this rollout is complete, the college will benefit from even greater levels of integration.

Howlett concludes: “This project is in part about making our network easier to manage when Doug Alm retires and takes with him his significant know-how. Already we are experiencing significant advantages from Fortinet’s products, but when the integration is complete, we expect to unlock even greater value by tying our network together and having all the information we need at our fingertips.”