

Casting the wider net

The UI-based group will likely soon install its 300th digital library.

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A pile of hundreds of bubble-wrapped computers lurks in the UI Communications Center waiting to be shipped away.

Destination: Africa.

For the UI-based Widernet Project, established in 2000, delivering more than \$500,000 worth of equipment is practically second to delivering accessible information.

Seven out of eight people worldwide do not have Internet access, said Cliff Missen, the program's director.

"We call it the World Wide Web, but in reality, not much of the world is involved," he said.

Widernet is a service organization in the School of Library and Information Science dedicated to improving digital communication in developing countries. Roughly one year after its formation, the group launched an expansion: the eGranary Digital Library, which delivers millions of Internet resources to institutions in developing countries.

The most rewarding part of his work, Missen said, is watching people's reactions at their first glimpse of the Internet.

"It's like they're drunk but on information," he said. "It's absolutely electrifying."

The eGranary Digital

Library represents the collective efforts of hundreds of authors, publishers, programmers, librarians, and instructors and includes websites such as those for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Columbia University, and Wikipedia. The library also includes journals, books, music, video, and multimedia files.

Volunteers at the Widernet office copy websites onto hard drives, providing instant access to those educational materials.

Recently, the Widernet group has focused on establishing a system for evaluating the use of the eGranary library. The latest endeavor, funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, encourages users from 290 sites around the world to fill out print and online surveys.

And there was a prize waiting for a lucky participating group: a free eGranary digital library, a hard drive "about the size of a paperback book."

On Aug. 21, UI President Sally Mason drew the winning group. A second drawing is set for October.

The Widernet Project has also brought its trove of information to groups in the United States and on the UI campus.

Widernet recently partnered with Ponseti International, an organization



JOE SCOTT/THE DAILY IOWAN

Widernet Project director Cliff Missen sits with a pile of bubble-wrapped, Africa-bound computers in Becker on Monday. Employees at the organization's office archive websites and other media into the eGranary Digital Library, making them available to institutions in developing countries.

dedicated to treating children with clubfoot using a nonsurgical method developed by UI Professor Emeritus Ignacio Ponseti.

Through the eGranary Digital Library, doctors in developing countries can watch video and read text on the treatment of clubfoot.

Missen said the most searched topic on the libraries is health care.

"People are most concerned with their health, no matter where you are," he said. "Through these libraries, people can easily access information vital to their health."

Volunteers are the main power behind Widernet and its many projects. With more than 200 student volunteers, there have been more than 12,000 hours dedicated to the organization.

UI senior Kim Willyard,

ON THE WEB

Check out dailyiowan.com for video footage of UI President Sally Mason drawing the winning group who will receive a free a free eGranary digital library.

the volunteer coordinator for Widernet, said she's most concerned about the publicity factor.

"Most of the people I talk to about the program think it's amazing but have never heard of it before," she said.

Willyard said Widernet is working with marketing professors, and she plans to attend more volunteer events to get their name out to the public and hopefully recruit more volunteers.

In addition, group members provide training for computer technicians and coach decisionmakers at African universities.