UI project seeks funds to put system in prisons

Written by Emily Schettler

The University of Iowa's WiderNet Project has helped bring knowledge and information to people in developing countries around the world with its digital libraries.

Now the service organization wants to expand its educational reach a little closer to home -- in Iowa's prisons.

The WiderNet project develops and installs servers that contain millions of digital documents without the need of connection to the Internet.

Heather Erwin, who works with the WiderNet Project, said the organization would like to eventually see the electronic libraries in prisons across the United States.

But WiderNet has faced serious setbacks because of lack of funding, she said.

The Corrections Offline Educational Portal, or COEP, would provide inmates with access to millions of documents to help with their education while in prison, Erwin said.

The portals can be customized and feature everything from Wikipedia information to instructional pieces about how to play and write music, Erwin said.

Because they are self-contained and do not require Internet access, they are more secure than other computer systems, she said.

The systems also can be used to help prisoners conduct job searches and learn job training and career skills.

And providing educational opportunities can benefit inmates as they prepare for release, Erwin said.
"There's been a big push for education and re-integration for prisoners," she said. "If we can educate people and give them the tools they need, they'll be less likely to re-offend or go unemployed (once they're released)."

The Iowa Medical Classification Center has been using the COEP system for five years as part of a trial run of the program, but Erwin said it's been at a standstill since installing the IMCC portal and a handful of others.

"We need funds to move this really worthy, incredible project forward, but fundraising is hard," she said.

Erwin said she’s been in contact with federal and state lawmakers about possible funding as well as a number of prisoner-education advocacy groups throughout the Midwest, but getting money is difficult, especially recently with a sour economy and tight budgets.

Erwin said the systems can cost between $7,000 for a single server and $25,000 for an entire lab.

"It's a matter of finding someone receptive," she said. "It's a fairly unique supposition, and we have a proven track record and a history of knowing what we're doing."