WiderNet@UNC

The School of Information and Library Science. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Building a Consortia to Develop and Manage a Secure Off-Line Information Platform for Correctional Education

WiderNet@UNC, based in the School of Information and Library Science, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and directed by Clinical Associate Professor Cliff Missen, seeks a $50,000 planning grant to build a coalition of correctional institutions to increase the use of off-line digital education resources in the innovative Corrections Off-Line Education Platform, creating a whole host of opportunities to improve rehabilitation and reduce recidivism for millions in the U.S. prison system.

WiderNet@UNC has developed a 35 million resource off-line collection over 16 years, garnering permission to copy Web sites from thousands of authors. We've worked with prison educators, librarians, and administrators for eight years to organically build solutions that address their needs.

WiderNet@UNC is building a secure and consistent off-line information platform for providing high-quality education to incarcerated and recently-released individuals. We have worked with dozens of prison educators and librarians to develop an off-line alternative to the Internet that delivers abundant resources for teaching English as a Second Language, GED preparation, high school completion, post-secondary courses, life skills, and vocational training.

The Corrections Off-Line Education Platform (COEP) is now installed in over 25 prisons in Iowa, Texas, Washington, and New Jersey.

Some examples:

- we developed a way for institutions to "quarantine" inappropriate Web pages and Wikipedia articles, drawing from a crowd-sourced list of resources (some of which were identified by inmates themselves)
- since our partners had limited financial resources to assist with developing custom collections for corrections, we recruited volunteers from UNC's School of Information and Library Science
- we developed a secure browser to meet unusual institutional requirements
- we customized built-in course management tools (Moodle) to prevent undesired communications between inmates.

We have surveyed over 300 inmates on their information needs. They identified their greatest needs as information on health (physical, emotional, family...) and life skills (managing money, being a good parent, finding and keeping a job.)

We have already attracted a half-dozen institutions to the COEP consortium model and have identified major concerns and opportunities. We have a clear ideas on creating a path to sustainability and believe we can accomplish it in three years.

All of this has been done as an aside to WiderNet's similar projects in developing countries (over 1,600 organizations have adopted this technology), sometimes drawing scarce resources away from our original mission.

After consultation with our partners in corrections, we have identified the need to expand the program to serve many more institutions and build a sustainable consortium of educators and librarians who can direct the development of critical resources, modules, courses, and certificates customized for the corrections milieu.

Most importantly, the broader adoption of this community-supported platform will address several key issues in corrections education. As inmates are frequently moved from one facility to another, they typically lose out on the progress they have made and have to start over. Successful reentry requires basic digital information literacy which is nearly impossible to teach without Internet access. Many individuals find their schooling grinds to a stop when they are released. Teaching vocational IT skills, like Web and database design, are extremely difficult. And few institutions have instructors with IT talents to develop courses.

By combining our efforts, we can develop and deliver consistent uninterrupted education inside and outside the walls. Exposing offenders to new ideas, new skills, and returning them to society better able to integrate and find employment.

This planning grant would provide WiderNet@UNC the logistical support to develop this consortia, increase membership, and define a broader proposal for developing and sustaining this off-line education and information service.

The grant would be used to hire a quarter-time graduate student to support logistics and deploy communications/collaboration tools as we recruit new members and identify consortia roles and requirements. It will also provide for a small portion of the project director's salary.

The outcomes of this activity will include a platform for close collaboration between prison librarians and educators, a far-reaching plan to deliver information and education to all correctional institutions in the U.S., and a couple demonstration projects with paroled individuals in underserved communities in the "free world" through our partnership with Durham County Libraries.

Budget:
We are requesting $50,000 for this planning grant. We have budgeted a) PI effort at @ 15% for the project year as summer salary – salary, fringe benefits; b) 50% effort of a graduate student research assistant – salary, fringes, and healthcare; c) domestic travel to field sites to complete the work of this study; d) indirect cost rate at 36% federally negotiated rate for "other" activities (non-research.)