

## Feature Article

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### WIDERNET REVOLUTIONIZES PRISON EDUCATION THROUGH COEP SOFTWARE

Often times when the public thinks about prisons, they only think about the headline captures. But the reality is that most people in prison are there because they made a mistake and they earnestly want to turn their lives around. The first step to that is a good education, said Professor Cliff Missen, director of WiderNet.

“As a community, I think we should want them to succeed and we will all be better for it,” said Missen. “Increasing education opportunities is important – not just to reduce recidivism – but to improve our communities, our society and our moral and ethical standards.”

WiderNet is working to revolutionize prison education through the Corrections Off-Line Education Platform. The COEP is an offline education platform, designed to provide an internet-like experience without compromising security.

“In many states, it is not possible by law to provide the internet to inmates because there are too many communication problems that can occur when inmates have unfettered access to the internet,” said Missen.

Providing inmate access to the internet is a massive undertaking due to the threat of organized crime or access to materials that can be used to perpetuate criminal behaviors. The idea behind the COEP is to provide a view of the internet from a hard drive instead of the internet itself, eliminating security risks and controlling accessible content.

“It’s a sanitized version of the internet, but there are still 35 million resources on the device so they get a really good sense of the internet experience,” said Missen. “This system has been adopted in 28 prisons from Iowa to New Jersey, but Texas has really been leading the charge.”

In every iteration of the COEP, there has been an educator who has championed the program because that educator recognized the need for an education program. Prior to these systems, educators would arrive and face uncertainty if their materials would pass through security. The COEP alleviates that burden because all the materials are housed internally at the prison, said Missen.

“A couple years ago I was doing a prison training program with inmates who had bachelor’s and

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master's degrees I was training them on being teachers,” said Missen. “After the session, it was a situation where I was gathering up all my gadgets and heading out the door when one of the inmates stopped me and said ‘whatever you do don’t stop. This is our only window to the outside world’,” said Missen.

In Texas, it was a librarian at a community college who latched onto the product and got the COEP initiated in the prisons she supported. Now, state prisons from across Texas have adopted the COEP and are testing the software as a method of streamlining inmate education with the added benefit of acting as a common platform.

“This is really great because inmates get moved around to different prisons and a lot of the time they have less than 24 hours before they are on a bus,” said Missen. “In the past, that has meant that their education has stopped and whatever they were working on at the first prison has stopped and they go to the new prison and they have to start over again.”

Through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Science, we are pulling together educators who use the COEP from numerous states and institutions to help guide us in the process of making the ideal software designed specifically for prison education, said Missen.

“For instance, in one state, they really want the inmates to login before they can even use the COEP, so they can track the inmate, the online behavior and what the inmate is working on,” said Missen.

The goal of the consortium is to keep the costs of the COEP as low as possible while still gaining insight into the COEP operations and improvements. Anyone who uses the COEP in their prison is welcome to be on this consortium and advise us on what we should be developing next. New features are added based on what the group decides, said Missen.

## Technology without Borders

Today, internet fluency is a critical skill because the bulk of the people currently imprisoned will be released and reintegrated into society. They need to have a significant technological skillset in order to apply for jobs or it is much more likely that they will return to prison, said Missen.

“We’ve been working with prisons for about 10 years now and the educators have been really clear about what they need and what they don’t need,” said Missen. “Early on we realized we needed a lot of life skills – like how to manage a checkbook and how to get a job.”

Additionally, the inmates also have a lot of interest in learning about health science topics, particularly, addiction and addiction recovery. Many of the inmates speak English as their second language and need language support.

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“We learned very early on that videos were way more popular especially for those who weren’t very literate, so we added a lot of Khan Academy videos and Ted Talks,” said Missen.

The resources are compiled by librarians who curate websites based on request or a need for the materials, explained Whitney Clarke, coordinator of the COEP. “We do not censor the material. Our criteria are: Is it accurate? Is it factual? Is it useful? Is it educational?”

After selecting a website, the librarians use a technique called scraping in order to capture a mirror image of that website at the time. They then ensure it is functional before copying it over to the database that will be put directly on the eight-terabyte hard drive or server.

“A massive overhaul and update of the information typically occurs every three or four years, but some have gone seven or eight, depending on the demand for new material,” said Clarke. “The real need for updates occurs when someone is doing research and they want all the new stuff that has since been added or they need an updated site then we do it every few years.”

This is particularly prevalent on sites like Wikipedia or in medicinal information because those might go out of date, but a lot of educational materials like math, grammar or literature never change, said Clarke.

“It goes everywhere from preschool all the way up to post-secondary graduate education; we even have some stuff from some medical universities,” said Clarke

Many prison education programs are centered around completion of a GED certificate, but they can only study for the programs out of a textbook, said Clarke. Currently, GED exams are predominantly offered online, leaving inmates lacking computer skills at a severe disadvantage.

Further, most textbook programs offered beyond a GED diploma provide insights into how to write a resume, but they don’t teach how to look for jobs on the internet. An inmate who has been in prison for the last 10 years lacks the inherent understanding on how to navigate the internet, so the COEP allows them to learn these skills so once they leave prison they are not behind, said Clarke.

“We also provide instruction on very marketable skills like word processing, excel and other office skills,” said Clarke. “We also have vocational information on there as well, you can see somebody welding or plumbing and you have that visual instead of just reading it out of a book and taking a test. We make it, so you can actually see it. It is all kinds of little things like that that we take for granted out here in the outside world that they just don’t have access to in their situation.”

Access to these resources has a massive impact on the lives of these inmates during and after prison. But the system has seen some drawbacks, said Clarke.

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Wikipedia presents the librarians with a uniquely problematic scenario due to the range of information available through the site.

“Some of the pages that wouldn’t bother any of us become concerns in prison, so we have developed a quarantine program to take those things out. We have worked in collaboration with Wikipedia on the back-end to remove the articles or pages that aren’t working,” said Clarke.

According to Missen, there are about 20,000 URLs currently in quarantine – many of which are Wikipedia pages – due to having content pertaining to violence, drugs, guns and other topics. With the push of a button, librarians can sequester these items without sacrificing other information throughout the site.

“The nice thing about our software is that one page can be removed but not the whole website, or we can narrow it down even further and just remove any pictures that are too graphic,” said Clarke. “We try really hard to make it user friendly for the prison higher ups as well as the prisoners themselves.”

## Funding Futures

The COEP ensures that inmates leave prison with a substantial educational background, setting them up to succeed in the outside. In the last 15 years, funding for prison education has decreased dramatically, leaving some prisons without the infrastructure to educate inmates.

There is a new interest in education to reduce recidivism, so there is a new set of people interested in looking for solutions. Eventually, I would like to see the COEP in every prison across the country, said Missen.

“Our offline platform has virtually no risk,” said Missen. “So, the idea with the consortium is to offer the library and make it accessible for any jail or prison at a price they can afford, and it comes with all the features that have been defined by their peers from across the country.”

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