In 2011, Librarians Without Borders began a partnership with Librii to assist this fellow nonprofit organization with developing its vision of building a Carnegie-inspired model of libraries across Africa.

Librarians Without Borders (LWB), founded in February 2005 at the University of Western Ontario, is a nonprofit organization that strives to improve access to information resources regardless of language, geography, or religion, by forming partnerships with community organizations in developing regions. Powered by student committees at five Canadian universities and a volunteer Executive Team and Board of Directors, LWB’s vision is to build sustainable libraries, support librarians, and use librarian know-how to drive lasting and sustainable development of information resources around the world.

Librii is a subsidiary of Libraries Across Africa, founded in 2010 with roots at Rice University in Texas. Librii’s vision is to work with communities to build a network of low-cost, digitally powered libraries deployed along the expanding fiber-optic infrastructure in the developing world.

What Is the Librii Model?
The backbone of the Librii model is the fiber-optic network that connects individual libraries, providing them access to a shared digital portal. This portal provides access to Librii’s digital collections, collaborative tools, career resources, and online educational services. Physical collections will be built on a print-on-demand basis from the digital collection.

Following a successful Kickstarter campaign earlier this year, seed funding for the pilot site in Accra, Ghana, has been secured. While the Librii organization will pay the up-front costs for the facilities and provide content updates for the digital portal, various revenue streams for select services and user groups will be implemented locally to promote financial independence and reduce dependence on external support.

Partnership with LWB
LWB provides the Librii organization with expertise to complement the skills the team already has in order to shape the library model, its pilot project in Ghana, and its future implementation in other communities in Africa. In addition to expertise, LWB provides a conduit for collaboration with existing librarian colleagues in those target communities.

The Librii organization provides LWB professionals with opportunities to deploy their expertise in philanthropic endeavors outside of their day jobs and provides LWB students with opportunities for service learning. Service learning is a form of experiential education where students engage in activities that address
community needs together with structured opportunities (typically through coursework) intentionally designed to promote student development.

**LWB's Research Contributions**

Since January 2012, the LWB team of students and professional librarians has been evaluating aspects of Librii’s model. Investigations have been conducted into various topics relating to its physical and digital sites and its potential user groups. This has led to white papers with recommendations and, in the case of students, academic papers. Some of the work so far is summarized in the following case studies.

**Libraries as Space (Whitney Spencer, Dalhousie University)**

In LWB’s first research project for Librii, Whitney Spencer examined current literature and best practices available on library design. Library use is a key consideration in space design, and Spencer found that most libraries in Ghana are built to North American specifications and do not take into consideration how locals currently use a library, or even what they want.

Not all best practices of Western libraries map onto the African domain, so Spencer looked at how to translate some practices into Librii’s design for Africa. In particular, she looked at issues relating to collection space, user seating/space, staff work space, meeting room space, and special use and program space. Foremost amongst her recommendations are that Librii consider alternative ways of zoning the library space to address community needs.

**Reading Culture in Ghana (Amanda Oliver and Emily McHugh, McGill University)**

In LWB’s second research investigation, Amanda Oliver and Emily McHugh examined the current status of reading habits and library perceptions in Ghana, barriers to the cultivation of a robust reading culture in Ghana, and best practices for promoting a reading culture.

Oliver and McHugh found that barriers to the cultivation of a reading culture include an official government definition of literacy as being able to read and write in English, the official language of Ghana though a second or third language for most Ghanaians; a lack of easy access to libraries; and limited literature available to the average Ghanaian.

Based on this research, Oliver and McHugh recommended that Librii support indigenous programming to promote a well-rounded definition of literacy, ensure that reading materials are available in multiple languages, and focus on the family unit rather than the school child as an individual, in order to involve as many members of the community as possible.

**Emerging Forms of Collection Development (Rebecca Ross, University of Ottawa)**

In LWB’s next research investigation, Rebecca Ross examined current digital content collection development in a Ghanaian context, where there is currently an average of nine Internet users for every hundred people.

Ross echoed Oliver and McHugh’s findings that while the 67 percent average literacy rate in Ghana is high for Africa, a lack of local Ghanaian content and a conflicting language policy inhibit literacy gains. Ross suggested that for a library to be successful in Ghana, it must shift its perception as a place of English-only content to a community centre built around Ghanaian information.

Ross recommended that Librii incorporate partnerships with local publishers and that it incorporate Ghanaian and African content into its print-on-demand model in order to encourage the consumption of local content and to better meet the needs of the community. Ross also recommended that “how-to” guides for using the computer, browsing the Internet, and so on, be translated so that community members can read them in their language.
User Analysis (Melanie Sellar and Erika Heesen)

Over the long term, Librii will grow to serve diverse community needs. However, at launch it will initially focus on students who are formally and informally pursuing studies geared towards advancing their employment prospects and professional careers. Melanie Sellar and Erika Heesen researched potential student populations and made recommendations as to how Librii might segment the student market into distinct user groups and, from that, how the digital library portal might then be customized to meet those groups’ needs.

Sellar and Heesen’s research showed that only about 40 percent of junior high school (JHS) graduates go on to senior high school (SHS), secondary technical schools, or technical institutes, and only about 30 percent of SHS students go on to tertiary education. As these numbers show, most students do not go to college; instead, many enter the informal employment sector with little opportunity for advancement.

With the rising rate of Ghana’s youth population and an increase in secondary school graduates each year, many qualified students do not gain tertiary admission due to lack of space and financial assistance. The greatest challenge for Ghana will be to provide sufficient places in school or gainful employment for the 5.5 million youth projected by 2015. Librii (and other organizations) could play an important role in the education ecosystem by situating libraries as places for students to learn and empower themselves.

Based on their work, Sellar and Heesen also made specific recommendations as to how Librii could resource the library—in particular the digital library portal—to meet these diverse students’ employment and education goals. They also encouraged the pursuit of partnerships with organizations working in Ghana and in Africa, such as the Ghana National Association of Teachers and the African Virtual University.4

Next Steps in the Partnership

LWB’s research has answered specific questions for Librii as it begins to translate its concept from paper into a working, physical prototype in Accra. The librarian perspective has been essential in this partnership: LWB has provided Librii with access to an international community of librarians for collaboration, research, library best practices, and knowledge exchange. To LWB’s benefit, Librii has enabled us to provide opportunities for Library and Information Studies students to take part in work with community impact. LWB looks forward to continuing the collaboration with Librii as it moves into the next phase of its initiative. 🌇

Erika Heesen (erikaheesen@gmail.com) is currently the Communications and Marketing Librarian for Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry County Library in Eastern Ontario, and Membership Director for Librarians Without Borders.

Melanie Sellar (melanie.sellar@gmail.com) is currently Education Services Librarian and Associate Professor of Information Literacy for Marymount California University in Los Angeles, and Co-Executive Director for Librarians Without Borders.

Notes