

The Road Ahead: Organizational Vitality and Digital Access

By: Clara M. Chu

Chu, Clara M. "The Road Ahead: Organizational Vitality and Digital Access," *EMIE Bulletin*, 17(4): 3-4, Summer 2000.

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

This past year as EMIERT Chair I have advocated libraries as a gathering place or conduit for the diversity of voices found in multicultural communities. Librarians play a valuable role in education and community relations by recognizing, respecting, and transmitting diverse and shared perspectives. As I finish my year I want to focus more specifically and draw your attention to one organizational and one professional issue which are critical to the future expression of ideas and provision of information services in a multicultural community, that is, organizational vitality and digital access.

Organizational Vitality

EMIERT, constituted as a round table, is in its 18th year of existence and if we trace back to its origin as an Ad Hoc Committee on Treatment of Minorities in Library Materials of the American Association of School Librarians (ASSL), EMIERT has been active for 33 years. Concern has been raised about the relevance of EMIERT and continuing its strong tradition as a national leader in multicultural library and information services. To address this concern, the Strategic Planning Ad Hoc Committee, established at the Midwinter meeting in San Antonio, has developed a strategic plan that will be presented to the Board, and once approved, it will be shared with membership. The plan focuses on continuing to exploit EMIERT's strengths and to develop an organizational framework to achieve its goals. Thus, it includes continuing to develop its leadership role nationally and internationally by collaborating and networking with other units within ALA, ethnic organizations, and IFLA; continuing and expanding, as appropriate, its publication and programming activities; revising the term and duties of officers as necessary to streamline the organization; and using digital technology to enhance EMIERT's work and promote its activities.

One strategic ALA action is a national public relations campaign to increase its membership. EMIERT, which has had some reduction in membership over the last several years, is also concerned about increasing its membership. Questions that bear reflection are: Is EMIERT significant as an organization to the library and information profession?, Is its mission still pertinent?, How can EMIERT continue to best serve its membership?, How can EMIERT encourage more active membership? How can EMIERT increase its membership? As the Board examines EMIERT's strategic plan we will consider these questions. Your input as a member is also vital and I ask you to share your ideas and thoughts to these questions by writing to me or the other board members, or by attending our Executive Board and General Meetings at annual conference in Chicago.

Digital Access

As members of a professional association addressing equal access to information and the provision of multicultural information, we need to work within our libraries and information centers to bridge the digital divide which is distinguished by race, class, geography, education. Research has shown (see *The Digital Divide: A Selective Bibliography* <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/chu/digdiv.htm>) that Latinos, Native Americans and African Americans, and those with lower incomes, geographically isolated, and with less education are less likely to own computers, thus, have less access to the Internet. Libraries and community technology centers (CTCs) have been identified as free public sources of Internet access. Thus, libraries need to respond and be ready to

facilitate usage of the Internet. The digital divide is of special concern to EMIERT because it is the traditionally underserved who are being left out of the information superhighway.

Closing the digital divide is a complex issue which goes beyond providing physical access to the Internet. To bridge the digital divide, librarians also need to teach and assist patrons in using the Internet, in searching the Internet, in evaluating the information they find, and in ensuring that accurate content reflecting a diverse community is available on the Internet. Several issues ago I discussed ways to unite multicultural voices in libraries and identified library service areas where action needed to occur. Again, I refer to these same areas in which we can act to specifically bridge the digital divide:

1. Staffing - Constitute a culturally diverse and multilingual staff trained to assist patrons in using the Internet. Embrace the provision of multicultural information in all its forms and languages.
2. Services — A library's Internet information resources (World Wide Web access and e-mail), Web presence, and OPAC, as appropriate to the community needs, should be accessible in various languages and to those with disabilities. See for example, the Queens Borough Public Library Website <http://www.queenslibrary.org/>, its InfoLinQ <http://web2.queenslibrary.org/>, <http://web2.queenslibrary.org/>, and its WorldLinQ <http://www.worldlinq.org/>. A library should provide Internet resources for community networking and for community organizations to have a free Web presence.
3. Collections — Multicultural and multilingual electronic resources should be made available and guides to Internet resources should be developed.
4. Programming — Provide Internet training from basic to advance, and as needed, in diverse languages. Some public and academic libraries serving multicultural communities are already doing this and their expertise can be tapped. For example: Barbara Miller's El Web en Español <http://guides.library.fullerton.edu/webespa/>, Phoenix Public Library <http://pac.lib.ci.phoenix.az.us/sp/enhanced!>, and San Francisco Public Library <http://206.14.7.53/intcenter/spanish2.htm>. Internet user training involving parents and children should be provided to promote family and intergenerational participation.
5. Promotion, Outreach and Collaboration — Libraries need to work with other community organizations which are providing Internet access in order to build on each other's respective digital capacities and services. Referral to each other's services should be established. Non-mainstream media channels, personal outreach, and educational institutions should be used to promote a library's Internet services. Outreach through children can be effective in spreading the word to parents and other family members.
6. Advocacy and Funding — Involvement in policy making and other advocacy efforts to increase access and reduce costs (e.g., E-rate) without use restrictions are essential. Teaching of information literacy is needed in order for patrons to evaluate the information they find on the Web. This is critical as 1,426 Web hate sites were found in 1999 which is a significant increase from 600 at the end of 1997, and just one hate site in 1995 (Simon Wiesenthal Center report, http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905354792&rel=true). Adequate funding should be built into the budget to provide needed multicultural print and electronic information. Additional funding needs to be secured to provide computer services beyond the basic level.
7. Research and Education — Studies are needed on how ethnoracial groups use the Internet, how it can be used to build community and the quality of multicultural information on the Internet, as some examples. Librarians need training on how to assist patrons in using the Internet in the language of their preference, how to find information in diverse languages and from regional sources, and how to critically evaluate multicultural Internet information.

As we continue to provide equal access to information in a multicultural society, the work remains to be challenging. With active membership participation, I will continue to work with EMIERT as a dynamic organization of multicultural librarians ready to face a digital future.