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Library Services to Emerging Immigrant Communities:

Library resources and cultural preservation

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The primary mission of public libraries is to serve the information needs of their communities. In an increasingly multicultural world this entails paying increased attention to the information needs of people from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. American libraries have a long history of support for immigrant communities, dating back to Andrew Carnegie and his conception of libraries as resources for "immigrant self-education, enlightenment, and the study of democracy and English" (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006 p.1). Today, there are more immigrants in the United States than ever before. According to the most recent estimate by the US Census Bureau (2004), there are about 33.5 million foreign born residents of the United States, representing about 12% of the US population. Immigration patterns are also changing; new immigrants are increasingly likely to settle outside of traditional "gateway cities" and have access to smaller immigrant communities and fewer support resources (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006). Effective library services to these populations are therefore more important than ever, both in basic library services (collections and reference) as well as through additional programs such as English language classes, community resource seminars, citizenship classes, and cultural programs.

Historically, libraries have identified groups to serve based primarily on the demographics of language use within a community – services and collections in minority languages were provided in proportion to the population levels of languages spoken in

the community. As immigration patterns have changed and more attention has been focused on the information needs of smaller and emerging immigrant communities however, some libraries are turning towards more flexible policies focused on the specific needs of the communities in question rather than solely demographic indicators (Cunningham 2004; International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions 2008).

Once immigrant groups within a community have been identified, libraries must reach out to them, both to ascertain their specific information needs and to make them aware of the services that the library offers. Especially in emerging immigrant communities people may not have experience with public libraries and may not be fully aware of the services available to them. It is important to get the immigrant communities involved in the life of the library, both so they can benefit from the resources the library provides them and so they can have a hand in creating the library services that are of the most value to their community.

Outreach and coordination with immigrant communities can be facilitated by partnerships with organizations that serve immigrants within the larger community. The US Citizenship and Immigration Service (2006) suggests that libraries should investigate partnerships with government agencies, community based immigrant support organizations, local educational systems, faith-based organizations, social services agencies, refugee and resettlement organizations, and local business organizations in their efforts to reach out to immigrant groups. In addition to helping share and distribute information, these type of partnerships can also provide concrete help such as technical

assistance, language and translation services, people to act as speakers or teachers, and financial assistance.

Library collections in immigrant languages are obviously an important part of serving minority communities (although it should be remembered that not all immigrants speak languages other than English). In its guidelines for multicultural library services, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (1998) urges that "all ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups" in a community should be provided with "library materials and access to networked information services in their preferred languages and reflecting their own cultures, on an equitable basis." For more established languages, assembling a suitable collection may simply be a matter of purchasing appropriate materials. For languages of lesser diffusion, however, things may be more difficult. Situations may arise where there is insufficient published material readily available to amass a satisfactory traditional collection.

One way to approach this problem is through increased use of electronic resources. One of the main advantages of electronic resources is that they can be easily shared – an information resource on the internet can be used by anyone with the appropriate technology to access it. Libraries can therefore provide access to some information resources for non-English speaking immigrant populations simply by providing the means to access existing language-appropriate resources over the web. To this end, many libraries have created web-based directories of information resources in languages appropriate to their patrons. Some prominent examples of library-created multilingual resource directories include the Finfo project (<http://www.finfo.dk>) in Denmark,

WorldLinQ (<http://www.worldlinq.org>) at the Queens Public Library, and MyLanguage (<http://www.mylanguage.gov.au/>) in Australia (Cunningham 2004).

Another advantage of electronic multicultural resources is that the barrier to creating new resources is lower than for traditionally published resources. When few information resources are available in a given language or for a given cultural group, libraries are beginning to realize that they must facilitate the creation of these resources in order to provide equitable access to information for users of these languages or members of that group. (Cunningham, 2004, Lo Bianco, 2004). The ease of creating electronic resources makes this possible. For example, Lo Bianco (2004) describes a program in which public libraries worked with recent immigrants to transcribe traditional stories from the library's multicultural storytime program. These resources were then made available electronically as a resource to help families teach their cultural and linguistic heritage to their children.

There are several challenges associated with multilingual electronic resources, however. First, there are significant technical difficulties associated with multilingual computing. It has only been very recently, with the adoption of the Unicode standard, that displaying diverse scripts in a standardized and universal manner has been a realistic possibility on the internet (and there are still problems for some less-common scripts.) Input is also a problem; for some languages there are multiple competing keyboard layouts and input software solutions, while for other writing systems there are no standards at all. Multilingual computing is still very much a developing field, and these issues need to be carefully considered by libraries in the creation of their local information infrastructure.

Technological training is also a necessary component of providing electronic resources. In order for community members to take advantage of electronic resources available to them, they will need to know how to use the technology, and even for those people who are familiar with computers, there may be language-related computing issues.

By involving immigrant groups in the creation of electronic resources, libraries can help build capacity within immigrant communities as well. Collins (2006) describes an interesting project being planned in which the immigrant residents of an Australian public housing project will be trained in translation to help provide public web resources in their languages. The resulting community-translation enterprise can then generate a revenue stream for these communities as well as provide a source for competent community-specific translation. Furthermore, the training and experience the participants receive will help provide them with expanded opportunities for employment in the future. Though the particular project Collins describes is not specifically library related, it seems that something similar could definitely be done within the context of a library's multicultural programs.

Once members of immigrant communities develop technological resources and capabilities it will also allow them to use the internet to keep in contact with people who share their cultural heritage, locally, back in their homelands and globally. Furthermore, if members of immigrant groups are able to create and use internet resources in their own languages, the existence of these resources will help keep these languages, and the cultures they represent, alive and active. Too often in our history, the story of immigration has been one of the gradual loss of language and culture in the face of assimilation pressures and isolation. By providing a way for people to remain in contact

with a larger cultural community, the potential of the internet to help people maintain their culture in the face of such pressures is truly revolutionary.

While the primary goal of multicultural library services is to provide equity in access to library resources and support for communities whose cultural background differs from mainstream society (and traditionally, whose needs might have been minimally addressed), supporting multiculturalism is of benefit to the whole of society. In its *Raison d'être for Multicultural Library Services*, (n.d.) the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions states that "the provision of multicultural information will benefit the totality of a user community. Members of a community can learn about each other's respective cultures, values, etc., the end result being increased understanding and communication." Libraries, by providing resources to assist people maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage are creating a more pluralistic society, a society in which the knowledge and heritage of all cultures has a place.

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