

The Multicultural Library: How Librarians are Responding to the Needs of Ethnically Diverse Communities

by Anneke Forzani

According to 2005 Census data, over 12% of the US population is now foreign born and about 1 in 5 residents age 5 and older speak a language other than English at home. These figures are expected to increase, and are considerably higher in many areas of the country. Many new immigrants are struggling to learn English while maintaining their connection with their heritage language and country.

As the United States has become increasingly diverse, more and more librarians are implementing creative strategies to attract and meet the needs of their ethnic patrons. Many libraries have transformed themselves into centers of information and learning for the diverse community. Following is a list of innovative ways librarians are welcoming and attracting their ethnic populations:

1. Presenting story times in various languages.
2. Offering newspapers in multiple languages.
3. Developing a collection of bilingual children's books for language learners and families trying to teach a heritage language to their children. Patron feedback has been especially positive when librarians set aside a "bilingual book display area" instead of simply including the books in their stacks.
4. Sponsoring/hosting English as a Second Language (ESL) classes or creating "literacy centers" to help adults learn English.
5. Offering special programs, such as citizenship classes or cultural programs that highlight important ethnic holidays (e.g., Chinese New Year, El Día de los Niños).
6. Displaying colorful multilingual posters, and putting up signs in multiple languages.

7. Carrying books that promote an acceptance of diversity, have multicultural themes and include illustrations of ethnically diverse characters.
8. Accepting alternative forms of identification (such as a Matricula Consular from Mexico) and address verifications (such as utility bills and rent receipts) in order to increase access to the library. REFORMA, a national network of library organizations dedicated to promoting library services to the Spanish-speaking communities, suggests that this will help ensure that libraries serve the community regardless of a patron's legal status.
9. Hiring staff that speaks the language(s) of the immigrant communities (another recommendation by REFORMA).

For librarians just beginning to develop their programs and collections for ethnic patrons and language learners, here are a few recommendations to get started:

- Look up census data to determine which languages your library should support. The Modern Language Association offers a Language Map where users can find the number of speakers of each foreign language by zip code, city, county or state (http://www.mla.org/map_main). The information also is available directly from <http://www.census.gov>.
- Conduct an informal (or formal) survey of patrons to find out which newspapers they would read and which language books are most in demand.
- Start with a small collection of children's books and display them in a bilingual or foreign language book area. This will stimulate interest, and drive more patrons to share their own needs. It also will provide an opportunity to assess which books are checked out most.
- Post multilingual posters and/or signs to welcome all patrons.

- Ask around to see if there is a volunteer parent, board member or teacher who would be willing to conduct a bilingual or non-English story time.

Ethnic patrons truly appreciate when libraries increase their language holdings and offer services and programs to meet the needs of non-native-English speakers. Small, gradual steps to move forward in this area meet with great response, and establish libraries as true centers of learning for the entire community.

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