

# Collaborative Technological Assistance

## Educause Project Helps MSIs Bridge the Digital Divide

by Isis Artze

If you're a faculty member or a administrator at a minority-serving institution and your college hasn't already made use of the IT services offered by Educause's AN-MSI (Advanced Networking with Minority-Serving Institutions) project, you'd better hurry; the project is in its fourth and final year. "What kinds of services you ask?" campus visits to assess campus network and IT, and provide recommendations; online training for campus network personnel; hosting services for online course development; assistance with distance learning; and many more!

AN-MSI was conceived in 1999, when the National Science Foundation (NSF) set out to help extend U.S. research and education beyond schools that traditionally receive funding, and created a four-year, \$6 million grant. Educause, a nonprofit organization, was awarded the funds, and created the AN-MSI project to help narrow the digital divide that many minority-serving institutions (MSIs) face.

"Educause was compelled by the research findings of the Department of Commerce on the Digital Divide," says Alex Ramirez, the project's Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) community leader. Of particular interest was the report *A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet* (U.S. Department of Commerce, February 2002), and its report on the traditional college-age cohort, 18- to 24-year-olds. "Even when dropping from the statistics Hispanics not enrolled in college," says Ramirez, "the divide persists when focusing on the high Internet usage group of 18- to 24-year-olds attending school or college: only 49.7 percent of Hispanic students use the Internet at home, compared to 74.3 percent of non-Hispanic White students."

Educause was also hearing from its large

membership, currently over 1,800 institutions of higher education, about the growing importance of the network, on-campus and the Internet, says Ramirez. "Not only the tremendous benefits and potential, but the difficulty and cost of staying current," he says, "even from large, relatively

1995-96 school year, HSIs received \$7,300 in overall funding on average per student, compared to \$15,000 received by all other degree-granting institutions.

"If the 'wealthier' schools are having a hard time keeping up with technology costs, how much more so the less well-funded MSIs," affirms Ramirez.

During the project's three years running, it has worked with roughly 100 institutions, says David Staudt, AN-MSI project director. "We're now ready to expand our services to the rest of schools that are interested." Brief descriptions of these available services are listed on page 18.

Ramirez adds that a recent development in their roster of services was the subject of a *Chronicle* article in July declaring: "Educause is seeking a few good American Indian, Black, and Latino colleges."

"Actually, the dot.edu remote hosting and support of online classes discussed in the article of the *Chronicle* is one of our explorations into ways we can assist with distance learning," says Ramirez. "It's not a separate component of AN-MSI."

The dot.edu model is one that has worked in Wisconsin and has proven to be cost efficient for the state, he says, which is one reason other institutions may want to participate. "We may find sufficient interest to assist in establishing a remote hosting and support site or multiple sites," says Ramirez. In essence, select MSIs would operate distance-learning facilities that other MSIs could use. [Any interested colleges should contact AN-MSI. For details, visit

[www.anmsi.org](http://www.anmsi.org)]

Staudt calls attention to the project name: Advanced Networking *with* Minority-Serving Institutions. "Notice that the name specifically says *with* MSIs—not *for* or *to*," he insists, "we're



Alex Ramirez, Ph.D., AN-MSI project's Hispanic-Serving Institution Community leader

well-funded institutions, let alone the smaller or less-funded institutions like many MSIs."

He cites findings of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) of the U.S. Department of Education that, in the

working with them collaboratively to reach the goals, and they've guided the project."

In fact, Educause asked MSIs for their input even before it had secured the grant. "We sent a draft of the proposal to Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), and the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO)," says Staudt. "They made suggestions, and we changed the proposal accordingly." The grant proposal sent to NSF was accompanied by letters of support from these organizations.

### AN-MSI Achievements

This past October, Yuma, Arizona-based community college Arizona Western College announced that, with the help of AN-MSI, it had implemented an end-to-end network infrastructure for data, voice, and video services. In so doing, the College, which serves a predominantly Hispanic student body, took a major step forward in meeting the growing demand for online educational services at its main campus and five satellite campuses serving a 10,000 square-mile area.

Arizona Western became part of a collaboration between AN-MSI, HACU, and the Network Resource Startup Center, another NSF-funded project at the University of Oregon, to perform the network analysis. After receiving the assessment and recommendations, the College chose Cisco Systems to implement a solution.

"The AN-MSI project provided AWC with a team of highly trained network professionals who offered the technical assistance necessary to make our college network state-of-the-art and move Arizona Western closer to being the hub of technology in southwestern Arizona," said Tim Shove, vice president of information technology for Arizona Western. "We could not have achieved these results without this type of specialized assistance from both AN-MSI and Cisco Systems."

Staudt affirmed that "What Arizona Western has achieved in the Southwest shows that non-profit collaboration, technology expertise, and public funds can help minority-serving institutions anywhere in the country develop the campus infrastructure and national connections to become full participants in the Information Age."

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) was one of the first campuses visited by one of AN-MSI's project teams. "UTEP is one of the lead campuses shaping the project," says Ramirez. "They also have a very informed, dedicated, and highly regarded president in Dr. Diana Natalicio. They were an outstanding host to the team and

opened their doors widely so the team could make an objective and confidential assessment of the campus network infrastructure."

In addition to acting on some of AN-MSI's recommendations and requesting follow-up assessments, UTEP was also the host campus for the video conference series "Harnessing Technological Change to Serve a Changing Student Demography—Strategies for Integrating Asynchronous Teaching and Learning Approaches."

California State University-San Bernardino (CSUSB) has also been engaged in the project since its early beginnings. "They, like other campuses, were facing the issue of network security, and were even unable to hire a network security officer," recalls Ramirez. "The project brought together some of the HSIs in the Southern California area; they began to work out how they could confront the issue of network security collaboratively in the region."

"They then sought funding to carry out their plan, and submitted a successful Title V collaborative grant," says Ramirez. "And the grant is seen as a model for collaborative Title V grants by the Department of Education." In addition to CSUSB, the collaboration includes California State University-Los Angeles; California State Polytechnic University-Pomona; Oxnard College; and Mt. San Antonio College.

### Lessons Learned

One of the benefits of joining the project at this stage, after three years of practice and even some trial and error, is that many of the kinks in the system have been resolved. For instance, Staudt says, they initially had planned "executive awareness" sessions that entailed presentations at conferences and meetings to convey the importance of IT to key individuals.

Campus visits turned out to be much more effective, he says. When invited, three to five AN-MSI representatives go to a campus. One set talks to the representatives about what they want and what problems they're having. Another set talks to the IT people. They then write a report with recommendations and possible follow-up services.

"Training is also a huge area," says Staudt. "Campuses have, on average, two to three IT people, and they often don't have funds for off-campus training." AN-MSI has arranged relatively affordable online training options.

Why else would MSIs want to participate in this project?

For one, "HSIs need to engage in the thoughtful use of this technology to provide education comparable to other institutions of higher education," says Ramirez. In addition to taking advantage of the aforementioned services, MSIs

can join the collaborations among institutions to seek joint funding to meet common needs, and can attend AN-MSI conferences.

Finally, for those who worry about some of the implications of "collaboration," Staudt assures that "Hispanic, Black, and tribal colleges are finding they have a lot of the same problems; and that collaborating does not, in any way, mean losing their identity."

### AN-MSI Services

- Campus Visits, in which a small team of information technology experts assesses the campus network and information technology organization and provides recommendations.
- Collaborations, in which AN-MSI institutions develop cooperative efforts for Internet connectivity or education and research projects.
- Curriculum and Faculty Development regarding the use of information technology in teaching and research.
- Assistance with Distance Learning, from helping institutions get started to providing expert advice on advanced techniques.
- Dot.edu, which provides hosting services for online course development using an array of courseware products. Services include: hosting, course management systems, instructional design consultation, software training, and the Solution Center with 24-7 support.
- Monthly Newsletters, which provide monthly updates on the project, as well as upcoming meetings and events.
- Online Training for campus network personnel, so they can update their skills without leaving the campus.
- Potential participation in Remote Technical Support activities with other institutions, to share expertise in areas including security, virus protection, intrusion detection, and 24-7 monitoring.
- Strategic Planning in which an experienced facilitator can visit the campus and lead the institution's team towards development of a campus information technology plan.
- Student Technology Services (STS), a unique service organization consisting exclusively of student employees, tasked with the operation of various computer, media, and technology related campus services.
- Technical Assistance in designing and implementing an updated campus network.
- Consulting on implementation of Wireless Systems, including secure campus networks and wireless systems to assist in community outreach activities.

