

Electronic Communications Committee
Board Report-----November 5, 2003

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The committee has been busy this year evaluating various conferencing products. Our final test in the fall was of WebCT, an academic courseware product (see previous reports for discussion of other products tested). The disadvantage of WebCT (or the other main courseware product, Blackboard) is that MPLA would need to "piggyback" onto a university's WebCT license (much as we are doing now by using USD to host the MPLA Website).

The various products we tested during the year allow for a number of advanced features, including:

- Range of participants (from small to large)
- Flexible interactivity level for presenters
- Flexible interactivity for participants
- Ability for the group to download, review and edit documents
- Ability for polling (real time voting)
- Ability to include other media (video, CDs, etc)
- Ability to record or save meeting for playback or archiving

After all our work, it seems that the disadvantages (particularly cost and lack of a consistent level of technology among member libraries) outweigh most of the advantages of these more "bells and whistles" systems. However, each of the tests worked well for a small group. In our discussions, the option of making better use of conference calls was raised. There are several systems that allow purchase of a phone number (some for as little as 7.5 cents a minute) whereby all participants can call into that number. This might be a more practical and cost effective way. MPLA could budget a certain amount for conference calling based on submissions by the various committees and sections.

One of the reasons the ECC has been charged with this task is that there are considerable costs involved in having multiple MPLA board meetings in Denver each year.

Thus the committee recommends the following for the Board's considerations:

- The ECC continue to monitor these technologies
- Discuss/explore a voice conference calling product that all MPLA entities would have access to
- Encourage small groups to make use of voice conference calling to conduct business
- Encourage smaller committees to consider use of software that allows basic small group interaction such as Yahoo! Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>). This would help them consider an alternative way by which they can do some of their group work. If a committee does use this kind of "electronic" meeting, ask that they provide feedback to the ECC on a short form.
- In the next year, consider having MPLA-ECC examine the costs and requirements for using one of the more sophisticated solutions for one MPLA Board meeting. This would not necessarily entail an actual use or demo, but a breakdown of all costs for the various options and on whether these are costs for which MPLA is willing to budget.