

# The NERA Researcher

## The President's Message



Darlene Perner

I am honored to serve as NERA 2013 President and know this coming year will be as successful as 2012. The reason that NERA flourishes year to year is because of its members, most of whom attend the NERA conference and contribute to its success in many different ways. For example, members contribute by reviewing proposals, presenting research and serving on committees.

Another reason for NERA's ongoing vibrancy, and one that has always left me in awe, is the collaboration and collegiality that exists in the organization. I attend many conferences but NERA is always my priority because attending a NERA conference is like going home. It is a warm, comfortable venue. It is a place to share in educational research and in friendship. NERA is where you gain

new knowledge and acquire new ideas. You see old friends, meet new ones, and share in the enthusiasm and optimism for the future of education and the students we teach and assess. From my first NERA conference 14 years ago until now, I have always felt the charm of NERA arising from the collaboration of its members who make it a strong, friendly and resourceful organization. This is what NERA is and what NERA will continue to be.

With my first message, I would like to share what NERA has accomplished this past year and to communicate with NERA members about the coming year. In doing so, I would first like to acknowledge the outstanding work that was completed this past year. Many members contributed to NERA, and their collaboration continues in making NERA an exceptional organization. Some of the accomplishments that I would like to highlight include this past NERA conference. Gil Andrada, Tia Sukin, and Craig Wells were the co-chairs who made the 2012 conference so remarkable. Also this past year, April Zenisky completed an updated version of the NERA Handbook. April involved present and past NERA members who assisted her in revisions and rewrites. Many contributed but ultimately, it was through April's leadership and perseverance that this overwhelming task was successfully accomplished. We now have a current and concise NERA Handbook as well as the NERA Archives which includes lists of the officers and other positions going as far back as 1930! [Both the NERA Handbook and NERA Archives are posted on our Web site at [www.nera-education.org](http://www.nera-education.org).] Also this past year, the Infrastructure Ad Hoc Committee chaired by Peter Swerdzewski worked closely with Palisades to initiate and manage NERA's new database system. Much time and effort were expended by all committee members, including Helen Marx for membership, Tia Sukin for conference issues and Steven Holtzman for website management, to provide a solid foundation for the current management of NERA and in the future. It goes without saying that the NERA Board of Directors, Committees and Appointed Members accomplished much this past year under the presidential leadership of Lynn Shelley.

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*The NERA Researcher* is the official newsletter for members of the Northeastern Educational Research Association.

## Message from the Editors

Greetings NERA Members! We hope you were able to attend the 43rd annual conference and that you found it as enjoyable and as enriching as we did! This issue is dedicated to recapping highlights from the conference, recognizing award winners, and giving you a glimpse of what's to come at the next conference.

Beginning with this issue, Bo Bashkov, a graduate student at James Madison University, replaces Christine Harmes as production and layout co-editor. Bo will be a wonderful addition to the editorial team which also includes Barbara Helms who continues to volunteer to proof-read draft versions. Many thanks to Christine for her excellent contributions and service to *The NERA Researcher*!

Finally, please note that the Board of Directors voted to reduce the number of issues per year from four to three. Going forward, the issues will also be renamed as follows: Winter, Spring, and Summer/Fall.

If you have any ideas or suggestions for the newsletter, please contact us. We would love to hear from you!

Bo Bashkov & Maureen Ewing  
Co-editors

## January BOD Meeting

The NERA Board of Directors' Meeting will begin Friday at noon on January 11, 2013 and continue through Saturday, January 12th at the Sheraton Hartford South Hotel, Rocky Hill, CT.

## NERA 2013 Board of Directors

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TBD

**State & District Consumers of Ed Research Chair:**  
TBD

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My second major acknowledgement is for our 2013 NERA year. I would like to start by introducing NERA's conference co-chairs for 2013: Steven Holtzman, Educational Testing Services, and Catherine Kohler, Southern Connecticut State University. Planning a conference takes much time and cooperation. Steven and Cathi have been immersed in NERA, working together this past year to ensure another outstanding NERA conference. [Please see Cathi and Steven's article about the upcoming NERA 2013 conference and save the dates, October 23-25<sup>th</sup>.] Also at this time, I would like to inform NERA members about changes this year in positions that are crucial to the organization. First, I would like to welcome the new NERA Directors Abigail Lau, Rochelle Michel and Javarro Russell, and Graduate Student Issues Chair, Jerusha Gerstner. Our new President-elect is John Young, Treasurer is Liz Stone and Secretary is Peter Swerdzewski. Newly appointed position members are Bo Bashkov, Co-editor of *The NERA Researcher*, Jim McDougal, Co-editor of the NERA Conference Proceedings, and Tia Sukin, NERA Webmaster. We have a great NERA team with our new or continuing directors, co-editors, and webmaster and with the many committee chairs and committee members who will be joining us this year! As with any association, new members replace other members who over the year or years have served the organization diligently in various roles. NERA is no exception and we thank all of you for your excellent contributions to NERA. On January 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, the 2013 NERA Board of Directors will meet to review accomplishments and on-going tasks and to identify needs of the organization in order to develop additional goals and plans of action for the 2013 year. To do this, the Strategic Planning Ad Hoc Committee chaired by Lynn Shelley, NERA Past President, will be reviewing the NERA Constitution and advising the Board of Directors on revisions as well as on strategic planning for 2013 and thereafter. We look forward to working with this Committee in setting new goals and accomplishing new tasks to continually strengthen NERA. I also look forward to sharing these with you in the next issue of *The NERA Researcher*.

Before closing, I would like to thank Lynn Shelley and Helen Marx who have been my mentors and have collaborated with me throughout the past year. NERA is truly an organization where everyone can contribute and share. With that said, I encourage each and every one to contribute in some way. Not only can you join a committee, write a proposal, write an article or provide news for the newsletter, encourage a colleague to join NERA and attend the NERA 2013 conference with you but you can also keep informed about NERA through our website and/or let me know what you need from NERA by writing to me at [dperner@bloomu.edu](mailto:dperner@bloomu.edu).

In closing, please share in our enthusiasm for the 2013 NERA conference on *Fairness!* We have an outstanding keynote speaker, Charlotte Danielson. In addition, and in the name of NERA fairness, we have an exceptional panel consisting of NERA members who represent the various fields in educational research that make up NERA: assessment and measurement, teacher education, inclusion, methodology and policy.



Charlotte Danielson

### Announcement of the 2013 NERA Conference

We would like to announce the 44<sup>th</sup> NERA Conference that will be held Wednesday, October 23<sup>rd</sup> to Friday, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at the Sheraton Hartford South Hotel in Rocky Hill, Connecticut. The conference theme is Fairness! Featured at next year's conference will be keynote speaker, Ms. Charlotte Danielson, internationally recognized expert in the area of teacher effectiveness. In addition, we will be hosting a keynote panel of experts on Fairness from the NERA membership who include: Barbara Helms, an Educational Evaluation Consultant, Kristen Huff from the Regents Research Fund in New York State, Tom Levine from the University of Connecticut, David Moss from the University of Connecticut, and Thanos Patelis from the College Board. Look for the announcement this spring in *The NERA Researcher* for details regarding submitting proposals to the 2013 Conference. For more information you also can go to the NERA website ([www.nera-education.org](http://www.nera-education.org)) OR contact the 2013 Conference Co-chairs: Steven Holtzman ([sholtzman@ets.org](mailto:sholtzman@ets.org)) and Catherine Koehler ([koehlerc2@southernct.edu](mailto:koehlerc2@southernct.edu)) and Like us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/NERA-Northeastern-Educational-Association/173051016042611>). We look forward to seeing you next year! Happy Holidays!



Socializing at NERA 2012



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# NERA Presidential Address: Neuroplasticity, Stress, and Resilience by Lynn M. Shelley-Sireci, Ph.D.

The theme for the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (NERA) was *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Educational Research*, and the NERA President's Award recipient Dr. Roscoe Brown aptly noted that educational researchers will only solve the biggest problems in education by adopting an interdisciplinary perspective. Hence, my president's address is from the perspective of a developmental psychologist, not a traditional educational researcher.

Policy makers as well as those in the field of education focus primarily on the cognitive development of children. But Dr. John Easton, a keynote speaker at NERA's 2012 conference pointed out that a number of recent books and articles have discussed the *academic* and *non-academic skills* children need to succeed. Even these terms highlight the lack of training educators have in this area. The words imply one set of skills is important and has a name (academic), and the other set is so nebulous there is not even a word to describe it (non-academic).

Developmental psychologists have studied the "non-academic" aspects of children for decades, and view them as part of a complex interaction of personality, social and emotional characteristics. But the impetus for my presidential address about neuroplasticity was not this most recent trend in education. It was my youngest son, Timothy. One night I was putting him to bed and he asked, "Can you tell me the story about the rats." I couldn't remember a bedtime story about rats, so I asked, "What story?" and he said, "you know about the rich rats with the toys." And then I remembered that one day I took Timothy and our dog to the local dogpark. Timothy did not want to be there, and asked, "Why do we have to bring the dog here?" So I explained that it is good for his brain, and I told him the following story.

## *The Rat Story*

*Once upon a time, a long time ago, back in the 1960s, researchers such as Marian Diamond and Mark Rosenzweig studied rats. Some were raised in traditional cages with water and food and sometimes a friend, and others were raised with water, food, toys, tunnels, a running wheel and other rats, this last group was said to have had an enriched environment.*

*After some time, the rats in the enriched environment were better at finding food in a maze, they were faster, more coordinated, and when they died (I did not tell Timothy they were euthanized) the researchers looked at their brains and found their brains were bigger and more complex. That is, compared to the rats in the traditional cages, the rats with the enriched environment had increased cortical thickness, greater neuronal and vascular complexity, and had more synapses with longer and more complex dendrites (perhaps I also did not use these exact words in the bedtime story).*

So we take the dog to the dog park to enrich his environment. (As you can imagine, it is difficult to be the child of a developmental psychologist). At about the same time Timothy and I had this conversation I was also worrying about various things my three sons were going through. Parents often worry about how the early experiences of children will impact them in the long run. Sadly, children are often exposed to things that place them "at risk."

## Risk Factors

As a professor of *Child Development*, I often teach about risk factors children face, such as Individual Factors like birth complications, special needs, hyperactivity, impulse control, a difficult temperament, low self-esteem, going through puberty, chronic illness, being male; Family Factors such as parental substance abuse, poor parental mental health, poor child rearing, having teen parents, parental criminality, parental divorce, domestic violence, parental stress (such as stress from unemployment), addition or loss of family members, illness of parent or sibling, family income (SES); and Environmental Factors such as social isolation of family, negative peer-groups, impoverished school, violent neighborhood, changes in residency, neighborhood with high unemployment and/or high density alcohol outlets.

After listing risk factors, I then describe what they place children at risk for, such as: Cognitive and Economic Deficiencies (e.g., poorer grades, poorer test scores, dropping out, fewer overall years of school, lower status employment, poorer earning potential, higher unemployment); Externalizing Problems (e.g., conduct disorder, risky behaviors such as automobile accidents, substance use/abuse, delinquency, early pregnancy, runaway, abusive relationships); and Internalizing Problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicide, eating disorders, insecure adult attachments, being the victim of crime).

But, a risk factor does not necessarily doom a child. For example, children of divorced parents are at-risk for dropping out of high school. The high school drop-out rate for children of married parents is 10%, and for those of divorced parents it is 20%— that is twice the risk. But it still means 80% are graduating. Why? And how can we protect children? I think the answer to this question lies in understanding brain development.

## Brain Development

Our understanding of brain development is in its infancy, but we're learning more every day. For a long time we learned about the brain from animal studies, autopsies, or studies of individuals with brain damage. Today our understanding of brain development is enhanced by modern technologies.

We are all born with a brain that is fairly well developed. At birth we have practically all the neurons we will ever have.

The baby's brain is about 25% of its adult size (the body is only about 4-5% of its adult size). Brain development occurs due to genes, which guide the structure of the brain, and the environment, including things such as diet, exercise, and social interactions that wire the brain.

At birth, the 100 billion neurons in the brain are not yet connected in networks. Neurons have axons and dendrites – axons send messages and dendrites pick up messages. The place where an axon and dendrite meet is called the synapse. Without synaptic connections, the neurons in the brain cannot communicate. During different periods of the life span there are times when there is an explosion of synapse formations – the formation of synaptic connections is called *synaptogenesis*.

Brain development does not follow a linear pattern with all parts of the brain developing simultaneously. The process occurs in waves throughout the brain, first during infancy in the occipital and parietal lobes, allowing us to develop our sensory abilities, fine motor skills, coordination, and spatial awareness. Then in middle childhood in the temporal lobe, resulting in improved memory and language skills. And during adolescence in the frontal cortex, enabling us to inhibit, control, plan, pay attention, and perform demanding cognitive tasks. As each region develops, circuits stabilize and become more difficult to alter; hence, there are windows of opportunity for healthy development, and remediation becomes increasingly difficult with age.

During the periods of rapid growth, initially more connections are created than are needed. So a child's brain has overall more synaptic connections than an adult's brain. But, when there are numerous neural pathways, messages travel slowly through the brain, and not in the most efficient manner.

During the course of childhood and adolescence unused synapses or connections are pruned off or destroyed. This process strengthens the neural pathways that are used often, and gets rid of those that are unused or rarely used. This makes the brain more efficient, conserves space and energy, and retains only the most essential and important connections.

So, it is environmental stimulation that determines what is kept or lost. Repeated use of a synapse stabilizes it; unused synapses are lost. This process of overproducing connections and then pruning off what is unused means the developing brain has tremendous plasticity – it is able to change in response to experiences. *Plasticity* is the brain's ability to change, adapt and cope with environmental changes, and to be able to compensate for losses. Synaptic pruning retains enough unused synapses to allow the brain to evolve, adapt and to switch or develop functions as the need arises (Shaffer, 2002).

Neural plasticity facilitates healthy development across a vast continuum of rearing conditions and might help to account for resiliency even when children experience risk factors such as non optimal parenting or economic adversity (Bryck & Fisher, 2012). But, neural plasticity can also create vulnerabilities – if the brain receives very little stimulation (like the rats in

the traditional cages), or negative stimulation there will be maladaptive wiring in the brain. For example, children exposed to chronic violence have brains that are smaller and age faster on a cellular level. Stress during childhood has even been linked to a shorter life-span.

### The Body and Brain During Stress

During times of stress the body has a physiological response. The body diverts all energy toward survival and fleeing, so oxygen filled blood rushes to the muscles, breathing quickens, heart-rate increases, muscles tighten, and pupils dilate. All systems not related to immediate survival slow down: digestion slows, immune and reproductive systems shut down, and blood rushes to the hindbrain where fear and distress are generated and diverted from the frontal cortex where conscious reasoning occurs. This response is great if one is trying to escape a mountain lion.

But usually the stressors children face today are not life threatening, nor do they require fight or flee. Nonetheless the body's stress response is the same. Chronic stress keeps the body in a state of constant alertness and protection, and does not allow for regular growth and development. Additionally, the immune system is shut down, so children are at risk for infections and stress related illnesses.

Stress does not have to be extreme or chronic to alter the brain – duration, severity, timing, type, and overall number of stressors are important. Clearly, abuse, neglect and poverty cause stress; but more common things can affect the brain and body, such as negative experiences in family, neighborhood, school, and playground (Blair, 2012).

Scientists are not sure what is happening in the brain during times of stress, but it is hypothesized that stress floods the brain with the hormones, cortisol, dopamine, and/or glucocorticoids – or if there is not a flooding of these hormones it is possible the brain becomes hypersensitive to them. Interestingly, short-term stress, such as a few hours, can actually enhance some abilities, such as memory (probably due to adrenaline), but long-term stress impairs abilities. Stress hormones are very good at helping to escape a mountain lion, but in excess they can do a lot of damage to the brain.

In children, stress is especially dangerous because the brain is still being formed, and stress both stunts brain development, and rewires the brain's neural circuitry. Stress can result in a chronic imbalance in the way the brain interprets and responds to other stressors. Neutral situations are responded to by the more emotional, "knee-jerk reaction" part of the brain. It is similar to what happens when somebody has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – environmental triggers can place the individual back in the trauma, causing them to freeze, flashback, or lose touch with reality. Chronic stress has the same consequence, the brain becomes wired to view the world as if everything is a potential stressor. The stress response gets permanently turned on.

There is a growing body of research to show that exposure to high levels of stress negatively affects brain development. For example, extreme instances of stress, such as that experienced by children raised in institutions, or children victimized by maltreatment, or even children in foster care, ultimately results in long-term alterations in brain development (Bryck & Fisher, 2012). But, it is not just extreme stressors that impact the brain. Research also suggests any source of stress can have this impact, for example from divorce, harsh parenting, or struggles with a learning disability. So children of all backgrounds and incomes are vulnerable.

Chronic exposure to moderate stress has been found to result in cell loss in specific brain regions, especially the *hippocampus* and *prefrontal cortex* (Blair, 2012). There is a degeneration of healthy neurons, and suppression of the formation of new neurons, which combined results in an overall loss of neurons. The hippocampus is a region of the brain responsible for memory – we’re also just beginning to learn that it can generate new brain cells (neurons). So it is not surprising that research shows children who experience low level but chronic stress, on average, have poorer memories – they perform poorer on tasks such as spatial memory and short-term memory (such as finding a token in a series of boxes). The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive functions, such as planning, impulse control, emotional control, and attention. Damage to these two areas combined result in an impulsive, overly emotional child with impaired memory, impaired ability to learn, and poor self-control.

For a young child, stress makes learning extremely difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, it should not be surprising that children living in poverty and children going through a period of stress, such as at time of family turmoil, are disproportionately incorrectly diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity (ADHD) or a learning disability.

#### Resilience

Some individuals, despite many forms of trauma or stress, come out unscathed. They experience the same stress, but there is something about them, probably in their brains, that enables them to get through even the most stressful of circumstances unharmed.

Today there is a fairly large body of resilience research that has identified a number of characteristics that resilient people have in common (Connor, 2006; Wolin & Wolin, 1996), and the exciting thing about this research is that despite diversity in people studied, cultures studied, types of adversities, and methodologies, there are very clear and consistent findings of protective factors (Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Laffavor, 2008). Combined, sometimes these characteristics are referred to as “grit” or “perseverance,” but they are more complex than just that.

Characteristics of Resilient People (Connor, 2006)  
internal locus of control (believe they control how they feel)

have personal goals that they are working toward  
find meaning in all circumstances in life  
use past successes to confront current challenges  
view stress as a challenge/way to get stronger  
use humor, patience, tolerance, and optimism  
adapt to change  
initiative/take action-oriented approach  
have strong relationships and ask for help  
have spiritual faith  
get creative (humor, art, music, dance)  
strong morality, willing to help others (whether it is younger sibling or others)

Protective factors buffer children and exist at various levels. They have not been studied as extensively or rigorously as risk factors; however, for decades they have been widely assumed to be important, and the existing research supports that assumption.

#### Family Protective Factors

Supportive, nurturing, and stable family environment  
Household rules and child monitoring  
Parental employment  
Adequate housing

#### Community Protective Factors

Access to health care and social services  
Strong social networks  
Caring adults outside family  
Communities that support parents and children  
Schools with high standards  
Opportunities for children in future (career or school)

#### Intervention

Of course our first goal should be to reduce stress in order to improve overall well being and increase the ability of children to learn. But some stress is inevitable, so understanding how the brain works helps us think about how to foster resilience.

Successful intervention methods to alleviate the negative effects of poverty have been around for decades; most have addressed the protective factors in the family and community (Austin, Lemon, & Leer, 2005). When we look at successful interventions with an eye toward brain development, we see that the strategies used recognize that alleviating stress as early as possible is important. The best inoculation is to promote healthy development (Masten et al., 2008).

For example, *Head Start* research shows Head Start works best when the family environment is supported, and parents are taught how to provide consistent, predictable, loving care. Similarly, *Nurse-Family Partnership* is a community healthcare program that provides social support and education for low-income first time mothers and children (Austin, Lemon, & Leer, 2005). More recently, the *Harlem Children’s Zone* operates on the premise that protective factors must exist not only in the schools, but also in the entire community (Robelen, 2009).

The commonalities with these interventions are that they start early and are comprehensive. They also require considerable time and effort, so in the short term are often perceived as too expensive. But when anti-poverty programs are examined longitudinally they tend to show an incredible return on investment. For example, the *Perry School Project*, an intensive preschool program, increased academic achievement, earning potential, and decreased crime and welfare.

More recently the focus of intervention has changed. For example, the *Bucharest Early Intervention Project* is a unique longitudinal study and intervention of orphaned children living in institutions under extreme conditions of deprivation. The study began in Romania in 2000. Charles Nelson and colleagues conducted initial brain scans of the institutionalized children and found that compared to a comparison group from the community, the institutionalized children had overall less brain activity. They also had lower IQs (average of 65 vs.103), more mental illness (56% vs.14%), smiled & laughed less, had fewer social interactions, delayed language, and few healthy attachments (Fox, 2011).

The researchers then randomly placed half of the orphaned children in high quality foster care. The reason they did not place all of the children is that they did not have enough families. These three groups, the institutionalized children ( $n=70$ ), the children who were institutionalized and then moved to foster families ( $n=66$ ), and the community children ( $n=72$ ), have been followed now for twelve years. At year eight assessments, all aspects of brain development were improved for those in foster care. For some things children in foster care looked the same as community children. They had a complete “recovery” (e.g., brain white matter). For other variables, children in foster care performed midway between the institutionalized and community children (e.g., IQ, some aspects of attachment, emotional responsiveness, anxiety disorders, brain gray matter). The results of this study have resulted in policy changes in Romania.

So although initially interventions were designed to promote protective factors, there is a new field opening up of highly targeted interventions based on our understanding of brain development, and how to induce brain plasticity (Blair, 2012; Bryck & Fisher, 2012). A key component to fostering healthy brain development, is managing stress. At the most basic level, to manage stress the individual must have exercise, a healthy diet, sleep, play/free time, time for creativity, and loving and supportive interactions with family, peers, and other caring adults.

### Schools

Clearly, it is difficult and costly to intervene, therefore there is a strong need for prevention. What can schools do? First, they need to stop being a source of stress. The combined effects of budget cuts and policies emphasizing success on tests have led to schools with stressed principals, teachers, and students. There is constant pressure for everybody to perform. Every aspect of the school day focuses on “academics” leaving little time for anything else – schools now have shortened lunch and recess, less time on the arts, and little time to connect with teachers on a social level.

Children need time to rebound from stress. Schools can and should be a safe haven where children can de-stress. Children need free time, time for leisure and play, time to socialize, and time for

the arts. For many at risk children, schools represent an asset-rich environment for both children and their families (Masten et al., 2008), but right now most schools focus exclusively on academics and academic problems.

At the most basic level, students need food and health care to nurture healthy brain and physical development (Wolin & Wolin, 1996). But more broadly, schools need to focus on positive things, such as strengths, resources, and protective factors (Masten et al., 2008). They need to look beyond just academic skills, and work with children on peer friendships, relationships with teachers and mentors, extracurricular activities, school engagement, leadership and motivation. They need to teach resilience. Characteristics such as persistence, self-control, how to seek help, optimism, and how to be action oriented can be taught. Schools need to provide warm relationships with adults, a supportive climate, high expectations, and rules and discipline (Masten et al., 2008). Children need opportunities for mastery – often school is the only place where they will experience this. Schools and teachers need to recognize and respect their students’ struggles and acknowledge the small victories.

### The Future

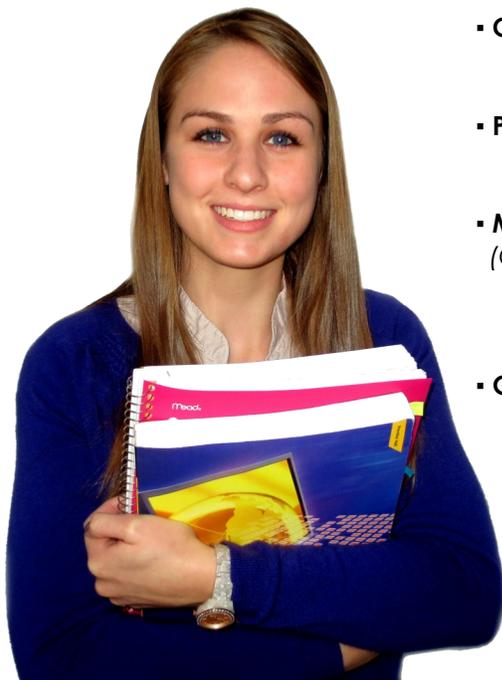
In conclusion, it is important to understand basic development, including brain development. We know there are important windows of opportunity when the brain is more plastic (for good and bad). Although we might want to, we can’t prevent children from having stress in their lives. But we can help children develop the strengths they need to be resilient. Working to reduce the stress children face would improve their general well being, as well as ability to learn in school. Additionally, research shows that the factors that reduce stress, such as humor, spirituality, and the arts, also increase happiness, optimism, general health, and yes, even learning and test scores.

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JWU alum **KARIN EDWARDS**

has worked at public and private two- and four-year institutions for the majority of her career in education.

Edwards has served in several leadership positions including nine years as senior student affairs administrator and nine years as a senior-level administrator outside of student affairs.

She currently serves as the dean of student development at Three Rivers Community College in Norwich, Conn.

# Northeastern Educational Research Association

## 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference, October 17-19, 2012

### Conference Highlights

Looking back on the 2012 NERA conference, we cannot help but reflect on the vast array of researchers who contributed to the success of this year's meeting. Conference participants arrived from all across the northeast as well as other regions of the United States (and from as far as Russia), to share their research, learn from one another, chair or organize sessions, facilitate discussions within sessions and volunteer in a multitude of ways to help make this year's conference a success. The program included 2 pre-conference workshops, 5 in-conference workshops, 26 individual paper presentation sessions, 9 symposia, 11 research posters, 1 working group session, 4 paper discussion sessions, 5 invited panels, 2 GSIC sponsored panels/sessions, 2 invited sessions, 2 keynote speakers, 5 special sessions and a President's Award.

We were fortunate to have four entertaining, educational and inspiring talks at the conference. We were privileged to have two excellent keynote speakers: Dr. John King, Jr., Commissioner of Education and President of the University of the State of New York—and Dr. John Easton, Institute of Education Sciences. Both keynote speakers took time out of their busy schedules to come to NERA to address issues they consider important for the improvement of education. Their talks were thought provoking and well received. A third speech was given by Dr. Roscoe Brown, Jr., who was awarded the 2012 NERA President's Award for his lifetime contributions to the field of education. In addition, Thursday night's dinner was followed by an equally informative and entertaining Presidential Address given by Dr. Lynn Shelley. We would like to thank all of the speakers for their part in making the NERA conference a success.

There were 7 workshops provided at the NERA conference, 2 pre-conference and 5 in-conference. The pre-conference workshops were led by Laine Bradshaw and Daniel Jurich (An Introduction to Diagnostic Measurement) and Luz Bay and Susan Cooper Loomis (Computerized Standard Setting). The five in-conference workshops were led by Gary Phillips (Addressing Two Commonly Unrecognized Sources of Score Instability in Annual State Assessments), Irv Seidman (Introduction to In-Depth Interviewing as a Method for Qualitative Research), Dena Pastor (An Introduction to Hierarchical Linear Modeling), Felice Billups (Designing and Moderating Focus Groups), and Bjorn Nordtveit (Qualitative Software: Introducing NVivo 10). We also hosted two special sessions during this year's conference. First, Diane Murphy presented a special session addressing important FERPA considerations (FERPA Consent Rules and Other Allowable Uses of Protected Data). Second, Danette Day led a rejuvenating yoga session for conference participants amid their busy professional activities. Each of the workshops and special sessions was well-attended and all received positive feedback.

We had five invited panels that provided insightful dialogue on a variety of topics covering blended learning, a multi-

tiered intervention model for reading, math and behavior, a change oriented plan of research, future directions in research, and advice from NERA past presidents on how to make the most of NERA. We would like to thank the panelists and moderators for their contribution to the NERA conference.

The Graduate Student Issues Committee (GSIC), chaired by Whitney Zimmerman, successfully organized two special sessions. We would like to thank Whitney and the other members on the committee: Antonio Ellis, Jerusha Gerstner, Jason Kopp, Minji Lee, K. Becca Marsh, and Oksana Naumenko.

We continued NERA's reputation of having fun entertainment via the band Branded (Anthony Edley and Danielle Greenwood) on Wednesday. On Thursday night, The Messikists made a successful return to NERA. We would like to thank the members of the Messikists, Stephen Sireci, John Mazzeo, Rob Cook, Gilbert Andrada, Katrina Crotts, and Helen Marx on drum.

In addition to acknowledging all of the contributors to the impressive program, we would also like to thank the many volunteers, without whom, the NERA organization and conference would not exist. We especially thank the 88 NERA members who reviewed conference proposals (see the Errata sheet in the conference material for the list of reviewers) as the reviews were informative and helped maintain the high quality of the NERA conference proceedings; the 43 members who served as session discussants, providing valuable feedback to presenters and informative ideas to all those who attended the sessions; those who served as session chairs, making sure the sessions were coordinated and run on time; and the many graduate students who helped manage the registration desk. In addition, we offer a special thanks to April Zenisky for lending not only her expertise and valuable insight, but also for volunteering her time to help with the registration desk.

Additional thanks goes to the Board of Directors for their guidance and feedback during the planning phase of the conference and for their immediate responses during challenges we faced when organizing the conference proceedings. A very special thank you goes to Helen Marx, NERA Treasurer, for her consistent support and advice, providing snacks for the conference breaks, and helping explain the budget and hotel expenses. We would also like to thank Kristen Huff, a past president of NERA, for her support, excellent advice, multiple contributions to the program, and introducing our keynote speaker, John King, Jr.

Last, but not least, we would like to thank Lynn Shelley for giving us the opportunity to put the 2012 conference together, providing moral support and excellent ideas throughout the process, introducing and honoring Dr. Roscoe Brown, Jr., and giving an excellent Presidential address.

Gilbert Andrada, Tia Sukin, and Craig Wells  
2012 Conference Co-Chairs



*Lynn with her boys after the Presidential Address*



*Group from Alvernia accompanying Melnick, the recipient of the Dolon award*



*Lynn Shelley and Roscoe Brown, the recipient of the President's award*



*Networking*



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## Teacher-as-a-Researcher Award Recipient 2012



Philip Harak

The 2012 Teacher-As-Researcher (TAR) award recipient, Dr. Philip Harak, is a high school English teacher in Connecticut and has been a public school teacher since 1985. He conducted his award-winning research for his doctoral dissertation in Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, in his own school with colleagues. His work and findings grew out of his own experiences as a high school teacher with Professional Learning Communities (PLC).

Philip's interest in this area began many years ago when he was a teacher in a psychiatric hospital. He found that this experience sensitized him greatly to the plight of individuals whose voices were misrepresented or under-represented. In Philip's view, in-service teachers are also such a group. He identifies them in this way because they are not well represented in the literature and, most importantly, they are acted upon rather than consulted with regarding their own roles in educational reform and teacher assessment.

Philip notes that his PLC was explicitly designed to:

- help teachers to recognize and account for the inherent complexities of teaching and learning;
- address the changing student demographics;
- provide a heuristic that makes sense of classroom and workplace challenges and external mandates of stakeholders;
- empower teachers to make decisions relative to their work domain, through the intervention's learning process and facilitation style.

An important philosophical and procedural aspect of Philip's facilitation of the teachers' learning experiences from a social justice perspective was that both the content and the process were equally valued. Therefore, his research design reflected this orientation and from the very beginning allowed the teachers to take responsibility for the content and direction of their meetings.

He began by first engaging the teachers in focus groups to determine what issues they felt they faced and needed to improve in order to deal more effectively with their increasing responsibilities and the diversity gap between them and their students. He developed a 10-week curriculum for weekly meetings with 11 teachers who agreed to participate in his study. At the end of the study period, he interviewed all participants about the impact of the PLC experience on their teaching and self-perceptions. They reported that the sense of community and support was helpful to them and that they felt they had made gains in knowledge, skills, and feelings of self-efficacy. Most impressive as an outcome of Philip's research is that the participating teachers continued meeting together after the sessions were over and these meetings have continued over the last 2 years.

Based on his research, Philip plans to continue to use his model for PLC from a social justice perspective and hopes to extend it to other groups of teachers. He is planning to work with administrators and other stakeholders who are interested and willing to take the risk of empowering teachers to collaborate in their own professional development. He believes that when teachers bring their unique and necessary perspectives and expertise to the complex enterprise of teaching and learning, such empowered teachers will provide healthy and appropriate enactment of personal power and agency to students living in an increasingly complicated and diverse human family.



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## Thomas F. Donlon Mentoring Award 2012



*Melnick (recipient of the award) and Gable*

Steven Melnick, a professor at Alvernia University, is the 2012 Thomas F. Donlon Mentoring Award winner. The nomination letters that were written in support of Steven described a person truly deserving of this award and someone who is highly supportive of his mentees, knowledgeable of his field, and someone who always exhibits care and concern for his colleagues, often junior colleagues, and students. Excerpts from the nomination letters tell the story the best:

"By far, Steven is the most caring, concerned, and knowledgeable mentor I have had who has a special knack for simply knowing what I need on a tough day, how to inspire me when I am passionate about a topic or idea, and holding me accountable for meeting the deadlines and most of all excellence." —*Ann Marie Licata*

"First, Steven is a scholar and mentor. He does not coddle or micro-manage. Instead, he presents opportunities and encouragement. Second, Steven has a fantastic sense of humor. For example, colleagues can disagree, and tensions can rise among faculty members. Steven always had a way to add levity to a tense situation without crossing the line of downplaying the issue." —*Denise G. Meister*

"Steven took an interest in everyone in the Alvernia Education Department, established a research oriented culture, and encouraged us to develop and share our research agendas. For several of us, the catalyst that sparked interest, collaboration, and action was when he single-handedly drove five of us to the 2011 NERA conference and introduced us to the excitement of research." —*Joseph Elder*

"There is no question or request he treats as insignificant; Steven welcomes the opportunity to help in everything from initial brainstorming of research topics to late-night final editing of a product worthy of publication." —*Mary Schreiner*

"And, above all, Dr. Melnick possesses the generosity of spirit that makes mentoring possible. He is always available for planning, discussion, advice, clarification, and guidance." —*Barbara A. Marinak*

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## Membership Highlights

This year we had 275 people join or renew their membership in NERA, with 261 members attending our conference. These numbers are slightly lower than in the past (membership over the past four years: 2011 was 295; 2010 was 337; 2009 was 362; 2008 was 320). The attendance of graduate students remained strong at 115.

	Membership	Conference Registrations
Professional	150	141
Retirees	10	8
Graduate Students	115	112
Totals	275	261

## Member News

**Lynn Shelly** recently authored a textbook entitled, "Developmental Psychology," which was published by Facts on File.

**Nicholas Hartlep** published the following research:

Walker, B., & Hartlep, N. (2013). Project Management for a University-Sponsored Online High School: A Journey of the First Year of Implementation. In G. Kurubacak & T. Yuzer (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Project Management Approaches for Online Learning Design* (pp. 99-113). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

Hartlep, N. D. (2012, Summer). The Stereotype Scholar: Reflections of an Adopted "Model Minority." *Korean Quarterly*, 15(4), 19.



Live entertainment at NERA 2012 by The Messickists

## Institutional Membership

The number of Institutional Members continues to grow each year. The support of our Institutional Members is vital to our organization. Institutional Members join at three sponsorship levels: Platinum (\$1000), Gold (\$750), and Silver (\$500). We appreciate the support of the following 2012 Institutional Members:

### Platinum Institutional Members:

- Center for Assessment, James Madison University
- Educational Testing Service
- Johnson and Wales University
- Law School Admission Council
- Measured Progress
- Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut
- The College Board
- University of Massachusetts Amherst
- Westfield State University

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Jerusha and EAP

The Graduate Student Issues Committee (GSIC) hosted two sessions for graduate students at the conference this year. The first session, *Obtaining and Maintaining a Career in Educational Research*, featured four experienced professionals in a variety of careers paths. The GSIC would like to thank the four panelists who participated in this session: Deborah Bandalos, James Madison University; Kristen Huff, Regents Research Fund; Thanos Patelis, College Board; and Cathy Wendler, Educational Testing Service.

Our second session was entitled *Using Simulation in Everyday Research* and featured presentations from three professionals from Educational Testing Service. The GSIC would like to thank the panelists who participated in this session: Neil Dorans, Samuel Livingston, and Michael Walker.

The GSIC hosted a Graduate Student Social again this year; approximately 40 graduate students were present. Students enjoyed complimentary snacks while mingling with students from a variety of programs and universities.

The GSIC will continue working on our mission of supporting NERA graduate students through conference sessions targeting graduate students, the Graduate Student Social, and the Best Paper by a Graduate Student Award. The winner of this year's Best Paper by a Graduate Student Award will be announced in the spring.

Four GSIC members completed their service this year: Antonio Ellis, Howard University; Jason Kopp, James Madison University; Minji Lee, University of Massachusetts Amherst; and Becca Marsh, James Madison University. We would also like to thank Katrina Crotts of the University of Massachusetts Amherst for serving with the GSIC as the Past-Chair. Thank you all for your service!





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