

The NERA Researcher

The President's Message



Greetings NERA Family,

With the New Year comes a new promise for changes. Most of our local gyms are packed to capacity with new members, motivated by the all-too-familiar slogan “New Year, New Me”; however, by the break of March and the warm spring days, we often find that enthusiasm has waned and, in its place, is a familiar complacency.

A settling into the normalcy of comfort.

As educational researchers, we too may find ourselves in similar patterns. We begin the year with renewed interest in a specific topic and are reinvigorated to seek out funding for our work. Perhaps over the various holiday gatherings and end-of-year celebrations, you have encountered a new person who is a member of our academic community. A spark was ignited to serve as a mentor or to receive knowledge as a mentee.

Don't lose the spark!

Much like after the time when our nation fought against itself in the bloodiest war of our history (The Civil War), there is currently a very real attack on intellectualism. We see it in the appointments of agency leaders where those leading have no formal or specialized training. We see it in the degradation of undergraduate degrees. We see it in the underfunding of graduate and professional degrees. We see it in the suspension of funding for decades-long, valid, and reliable research. We see it in the podcasters who decry college as a scam and encourage other young adults to bypass it in favor of simply listening to others or getting their information online.

Inside this Issue

Executive Committee, Board of Directors, & Appointed Positions 3

Message from the Editors3

2025 Presidential Address4

2025 Conference Report & Highlights.....6

Leo D. Doherty Award Recipient: Jonathan Steinberg.....10

Thomas F. Donlon Award Recipient:Henry Johnson.....11

Educator as Researcher Recipient: Dr. Kaitlyn Kakaledes.....12

Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Award Recipient: Kaijia Liu.....13

2026 Conference Highlights & Call.....14

Get to Know Steve Sireci.....16

New Member Spotlight: Deirdre Rood.....18

Seasoned Member Spotlight: Felice Billups.....19

Graduate Student Issues Committee (GSIC) Update20

Membership Committee Update.....22

Communications Committee Update.....22

Board & Business Highlights.....23

Leo D. Doherty Award: 2026 Call for Nominations26

Thomas F. Donlon Award: 2026 Call for Nominations27

Educator as Researcher: 2026 Call for Submissions.....28

95 Years of NERA By: Barbara J. Helms.....38

This year, the entire theme of my term as NERA president is “Keepin’ it REAL in the Age of AI.” AI does not mean only Artificial Intelligence; it also means Anti-Intellectualism.

Join us this year as we revisit a time reminiscent of the Enlightenment combined with the Renaissance. We will have webinar series, virtual socials, and, of course, our annual conference to celebrate the greatness of our NERA membership, which continues to pursue excellence in educational research with integrity.

Tabitha Bellamy, PhD
New Jersey Department of Education

cognia[®]



**The Center for Assessment
and Research Studies**

The *NERA Researcher* is the official newsletter of the Northeastern Educational Research Association.
Message from the Editors

Dear NERA colleagues:

Happy New Year! Welcome to all of our new Officers and Committee Chairs and Members! The Northeast has already seen its share of cold weather in 2026. In this issue, we can remember warmer weather as we enjoy a recap of the 2025 conference. Be sure to check out the Board of Directors meeting summary and Business meeting minutes from the meetings that were convened at the conference to see what leadership has been working on and find out what issues members should be aware of.

Also find a preview of the 2026 conference and exciting new events that have been planned! Read about what committees including the Communications Committee, Membership Committee, and Graduate Student Issues Committee (GSIC) have been up to and have in store. In particular, we hope that graduate students will learn more about what the GSIC has to offer and will get involved.

We are excited to welcome a new member to our team: Deirdre Rood. You can find out more about Deirdre and Felice Billups in their Member Spotlights. One of our team's recent alumni, Maura Maxfield, premieres a new feature, an interview with Steve Sireci. In this new format, we hope to provide another way to learn about our friends and colleagues and what they do. What did young Steve want to be when he grew up? Find out in the interview! We are also fortunate to have our own Barbara J. Helms reflecting on 95 years of the organization in its many forms, based on her keynote address at the 2025 conference.

Elizabeth "Liz" Stone, Consultant
Barbara J. Helms, Freelance Editor
Deirdre Rood, William Paterson University
Felice Billups, Johnson & Wales University

Executive Committee

President:

Tabitha Bellamy
New Jersey Department of Education
President-nera-education.org

President-Elect:

Hank Johnson
New England Institute of Technology

Past President:

Lisa Keller
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Treasurer:

Frank Padellaro
Dover Measurement Group, Inc.

Secretary:

Sarah Ferguson
Rowan University

Board of Directors

Beth Perkins (2023-2026)
American Association of Colleges and Universities

Brian Leventhal (2023-2026)
James Madison University

Jerusha Henderek (2026-2029)
Amira Learning

Mina Lee (2024-2027)
Cambium Assessment

Rory Lazowski (2024-2027)
College Board

Huyuni Suratt (2026-2029)
Seton Hall University

Appointed Positions

2026 Conference Co-Chairs:

Taneshia Beverly
Google

Matthew James Madison
University of Georgia

Jordana Simmons Berwise
Rowan University

The NERA Researcher Editorial Board:

Elizabeth (Liz) Stone
Independent Consultant

Barbara J. Helms
Freelance Editor/Independent Consultant

Felice Billups
Johnson & Wales University

Deirdre Rood
William Patterson University

NERA Webmaster:
Yu Bao
James Madison University

NERA Conference Proceedings Editor for Digital Commons:
Kate Nolan
Amira Learning

Beth Perkins
American Association of Colleges and Universities

Mentoring Program Co-Chairs:

Krishna Chaitanya Rao Kathala
University of North Carolina

Duy Pham
New Meridian Corporation

STANDING COMMITTEES

Communications Chair:
Yu Bao
James Madison University
(Webmaster)

Infrastructure Chair:
Kate Schaefer
James Madison University

Membership Chair:
Shelby Perry
New England Institute of Technology

Nominations Chair:
Lisa Keller
University of Massachusetts

Graduate Student Issues Chair:
Matthew Speno
University of Kansas

Corporate Governance Chair:
Hank Johnson
New England Institute of Technology

AWARDS COMMITTEES

Thomas Donlon Mentoring Award Chair:
Samuel Fancera
William Paterson University

Leo D. Doherty Memorial Award Chair:
Thanos Patelis
University of Kansas &
Johns Hopkins University

Educator-As-Researcher Award Chair:
Marcy Delcourt
Western Connecticut State University

Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Chair:
Rochelle Michel
Smarter Balanced

AD HOC COMMITTEES

Member Advocacy Chair:
Pamela Kaliski
American Board of Internal Medicine

Site Selection Chair:
Tabitha Bellamy
New Jersey Department of Education

Strategic Planning Chair:
Bo Bashkov
IXL Learning

2025 Presidential Address

Every Measure Has a Shadow: Linking Criteria and Consequences in Assessment Presidential Address

1

Lisa A. Keller
NERA 2025

Taylor Swift is not the only one who has different eras. We all do. The NERA Presidency marked the start of a new era for me. The Era where I am daring to be my true, authentic, unapologetic self, unafraid to speak my truth, not only in my personal life but also in my professional life. Being the NERA President pushed me into this era, and while it was uncomfortable at times, it helped to shape me in a way that other experiences have not.

In preparing for this address, I was struck by the Taylor Swift lyrics: “I have been afflicted with a terminal uniqueness, I have been dying all my life to seem cool.” (Swift, 2025).

All my life, I felt like I didn’t fit in. I felt like I was different and that no one understood me. Basically, I felt weird. I spent the first 50 years of my life trying to “seem cool” or to fit in the way I believed people wanted me to. To be the perfect child, wife, mother, colleague, friend, etc. As a result, I was not living in alignment with who I am.

I also had the good fortune of having strengths and skills that allowed me to fit the molds I thought I should fit into. But the pain of not living my authentic life was ever-present, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness, even in the presence of good friends, colleagues, and family. But NERA has always been a place where I feel like I belong.

This experience has drawn me to the plight of those who also suffer from not fitting the mold society has set forth, especially when their uniqueness is less amenable to fitting the mold.

Some of you know that I am the mom of a so-called special needs child. My daughter, Samantha, is non-verbal and not independently mobile. I hate the term special needs; I hate most of the language around ability/disability, and it has created a challenge for me as I raise a daughter with extraordinary needs.

¹ Modified from the presented version.

Member News

Almut Zieher, Craig Bailey, Christina Cipriano, Tessa McNaboe, Krista Smith, & Michael Strambler (Yale Child Study Center, Education Collaboratory at Yale) were awarded 2025 Perspectives Article of the Year for Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy for their article “*Considering the ‘How’ of SEL: A framework for the pedagogies of social and emotional learning*” (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2024.100030>). In the announcement on LinkedIn (<https://lnkd.in/e-BREaTU>), the journal states, “This article offers a powerful and timely framework for understanding how SEL is taught, advancing the field beyond what works to how practice actually unfolds in learning environments.”

Betsy McCoach (Fordham University) and Anthony Gambino (University of Connecticut) have published an article on the Stata command that Anthony wrote to compute Rights and Sterba’s R-squared measures in Stata mixed. It has some nice features, including conflation detection. The full paper: “r2_mlm: A Command for Computing R-squared measures for models fit by mixed” is available at https://www.linkedin.com/posts/betsy-mccoach-360508383_r2mlm-activity-7409312443547549696-N701?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAeZLI4BZYvrRkzzPFyC8QbSZfbc3eVc5HK Gambino, A. J., & McCoach, D. B. (2025). r2_mlm: A command for computing R-squared measures for models fit by mixed. The Stata Journal: Promoting Communications on Statistics and Stata, 25(4), 719-742. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536867X251398326> (Original work published 2025)

4

Continued on next page

As you might imagine, being Sam’s mom has shaped my personal and professional identity and has fundamentally changed the way I view and interact with the world. What it has also done is challenge my beliefs and assumptions about those who look different, who act different, or who don’t fit the mold in any way. It has made me even more sensitive to those who appear to be “typical” but whose difficulties are invisible.

Unfortunately, when someone looks like my daughter and cannot speak, many people assume that she is not very smart. Since her birth, her development has been put under the microscope, and any deviation from “normal” was pathologized. I knew that, being her mom, I would be required to be her biggest cheerleader and her greatest advocate. I felt passionately about this role. This required me to be in the world in a different way. I was living in constant cognitive dissonance about being required to teach the world that even though my daughter didn’t fit the mold, her worth was not less. At the same time, I didn’t believe that was true of myself; my own worth was tied to fitting the mold.

These experiences have shaped the way that I look at educational measurement today.

Assessment

When my daughter was 2 or 3, she was administered a cognitive assessment in my home. A ball was placed under one of three cups, and she was asked to lift the cup that the ball was under. She was unable to physically pick the cup up. The item was marked wrong. This entire assessment was a test of motor skills, but the interpretations were all about cognition. I asked the developmental specialist about the validity of the test, and while she agreed with my concerns and criticisms, she said the phrase that I would continue to hear throughout her life...“Who cares if the tests are accurate? Who cares what labels we place on her? The labels open access to supports, resources, and opportunities.”

I spent the next 10 years fighting with teachers and therapists about the abilities of my child. All these labels that were loaded on her to increase her opportunities were limiting her opportunities. The labels resulting from assessments were limiting the life my daughter had access to and were not allowing her to reach her full potential, whatever that may be.

Javier Suárez-Álvarez (UMass Center for Educational Assessment) and three UMass colleagues shared their new article, “Co-Designing Culturally Responsive Reading Assessments,” published in the *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation Journal*. Abstract: As societies become more diverse, the population of adult learners is also growing increasingly heterogeneous. Adult education systems must adapt accordingly to ensure that lifelong learning opportunities remain accessible and relevant for all. However, the cultural diversity and lived experiences of adult learners are underrepresented in existing assessments. To better represent learners’ diversity, this study aims to apply culturally responsive assessment principles in the co-design of adult reading assessments. Nine adult educators and fourteen adult learners co-developed nine fictional representations (avatars) that reflect the cultural backgrounds, ethnic identities, lived experiences, and learning goals of adult learners. Educators adapted eight reading passages, which were then revised by test developers to align with these fictional avatars, ensuring that the passages incorporated culturally responsive tenets. Reflections from learners and educators highlighted enhanced engagement, as well as challenges and areas for improvement throughout the study. The adapted reading passages showed appropriate readability levels, and the assessment items reflected acceptable difficulty levels for the target population. The study also showed that the co-design process strengthened key culturally responsive assessment principles, including shared power, engagement, high expectations, and an asset-based approach in test development. Suggestions for future research are provided. Read the full article:

<https://lnkd.in/ee2b-24T>
Immanuel, A. S., Nasyrova, A., Alakbarova, V., & Suarez Alvarez, J. (2025). Co-designing Culturally Responsive Reading Assessments, *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*. 30(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.7275/pare.3271>

Continued on page 32

2025 Conference Report and Highlights

Eduardo Crespo-Cruz, Hongyu Diao, and Dongwei Wang

Dear NERA Community,

As we step into 2026, we hope this year brings new focus, steady progress, and a positive outlook for the work ahead. We also hope the meaningful experiences shared at the NERA 2025 conference continue to remind us of the strength of our community and what we can accomplish together. We want to express our sincere gratitude to all attendees, volunteers, presenters, and contributors. Your enthusiasm and dedication are truly the heart of NERA. As we conclude our work as conference co-chairs, we are pleased to share this final conference report with you.

The NERA 2025 conference, centered on the theme “Illuminating the Margins: Education for Every Mind,” underscored our shared commitment to expanding educational access and elevating the voices of those often underrepresented. This year’s program featured a rich and varied set of offerings, including **two invited panels, six roundtable sessions, two poster sessions, and twenty-nine individual paper and symposium sessions**, many of which engaged directly with the conference theme. With **approximately 211 registrants**, the conference brought together an exceptionally diverse community, including graduate students, faculty members, and professional practitioners, as well as high school and undergraduate students, whose participation contributed fresh perspectives to our collective dialogue.

We were honored to feature two exceptional keynote speeches this year. Dr. Barbara J. Helms, a long-standing and deeply respected NERA member, offered an illuminating reflection on the organization’s history, highlighting the people, milestones, and shared commitments that have shaped NERA over time. Rachel Adams offered a powerful and engaging keynote centered on her experiences working with neurodivergent students. She challenged deficit-based perceptions and demonstrated how Universal Design principles can be applied to create more inclusive learning environments. In her Presidential Address, Dr. Lisa Keller shared a deeply personal and heartfelt narrative about her journey as the parent of a neurodivergent child. She thoughtfully connected these lived realities to a broader vision for designing pedagogy and educational systems that compassionately and effectively support learners of all kinds.

Additionally, the pre-conference workshops offered rich learning opportunities across a range of timely and highly relevant topics, including Introduction to Longitudinal Diagnostic Classification Models, Introduction to Python, and Exploring Co-designed Educational Research. Each session was well attended and received strong engagement from our members. Social activities such as 3MT, Karaoke, GSIC events, and Mentoring sessions provided welcoming and energizing spaces for networking, community-building, and fostering meaningful connections among NERA colleagues.

NERA is a volunteer-run organization, and we depend on both our membership and our sponsors to bring this conference to the community each year. We thank our 16 sponsors for contributing \$27,088 in support of the 2025 conference. We also want to thank the members who contributed an additional \$3,258 in personal donations. We are pleased to report that, despite rising food costs, we managed to cover all conference expenses without increasing the conference fees, while still delivering an engaging and meaningful experience for all attendees. The conference T-shirts were an especially popular addition this year and were well-liked by our members. We were grateful for the generous donations contributed by attendees who picked up a T-shirt, which will help support NERA's ongoing work and initiatives.

As we wrap up our time as conference co-chairs and welcome the incoming 2026 leadership team, we want to express our deepest appreciation for your engagement and support throughout NERA 2025. We wish you a year ahead filled with purpose, progress, and connection as we continue working together to advance educational research. We look forward to gathering again in Trumbull, CT, for NERA 2026!

Eduardo Crespo-Cruz, Hongyu Diao, and Dongwei Wang
2025 Conference Co-Chairs







DIA

Higher Education Collaborators

Leo D. Doherty Memorial Award for Outstanding Leadership and Service

Jonathan Steinberg

NERA is delighted to announce that Jonathan Steinberg is the 2025 recipient of the Leo D. Doherty Memorial Award for Outstanding Leadership and Service. This award recognizes individuals whose sustained commitment and leadership have made a lasting difference in our organization, and Jonathan exemplifies these qualities in every way.

For nearly two decades, Jonathan has been deeply involved in NERA, serving in an extraordinary range of leadership roles. He has chaired multiple committees, including Communications, Infrastructure, Nominations, and Site Selection; co-chaired the 2021 conference, and most recently served as President-Elect, President, and Past-President. Along the way, he has also been a familiar and welcoming presence at conferences as a presenter, chair, and discussant.

What sets Jonathan apart is not just how much he has done, but how he does it. In every role, he looks for ways to improve systems, expand opportunities, and make it easier for others to get involved. He reimagined the Communications Committee to create clearer roles and entry points for new members, strengthened NERA's infrastructure and documentation to support future leaders, and helped guide the organization through a successful virtual conference during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As president, Jonathan focused on NERA's long-term health and inclusivity. He led major updates to the NERA Constitution and Bylaws, helped establish the Governance Committee, and championed initiatives including the Travel Grant Program and outreach to high school students and undergraduates interested in educational research.

Just as important as his formal leadership is Jonathan's role as a connector and mentor. He is known for going out of his way to welcome new members, encourage participation, and support colleagues at every stage of their careers. Many members credit Jonathan with making their first NERA conference feel approachable and with convincing them to come back.

Jonathan's generosity, vision, and steady commitment have helped shape NERA into the supportive, engaged community it is today. We are grateful for his many contributions and proud to recognize him with the 2025 Leo D. Doherty Memorial Award.



Thomas F. Donlon Memorial Award for Distinguished Mentoring

Henry “Hank” Johnson, New England Institute of Technology



The committee for the 2025 Thomas F. Donlon Memorial Award for Distinguished Mentoring proudly recognized Professor Henry “Hank” Johnson as this year’s recipient. Professor Johnson, Associate Professor and Chair of the Business Management Department at New England Institute of Technology, exemplifies the spirit of mentorship that this award honors.

Professor Johnson’s influence as a mentor is both profound and enduring. Students and colleagues alike describe him as compassionate, approachable, and unwavering in his commitment to their academic, professional, and personal success. His office has become a welcoming space where individuals feel supported and empowered to grow.

Hank’s mentorship extends far beyond the classroom. Known for his intentional approach, he tailors guidance to meet the unique needs of each person. Whether assisting a student with their first research project, encouraging a clinician to compete in a business conference, or supporting a colleague through personal challenges, his impact is transformative.

Beyond individual mentorship, Professor Johnson has introduced countless members to the NERA community, fostering engagement and a sense of belonging. His leadership roles, which includes serving as President of the Society for Advancement of Management, underscore his dedication to advancing education and professional development. As one nominator wrote, “Hank Johnson is a rare and remarkable mentor... his contributions to NERA, his unwavering dedication to others, and his lasting impact make him an ideal recipient of this distinguished award.” Please join us in congratulating Professor Hank Johnson on receiving the 2025 Thomas F. Donlon Memorial Award for Distinguished Mentoring.

Samuel Fancera, 2025 Committee Chair
William Paterson University

2025 NERA Educator-As-Researcher Award

Dr. Kaitlyn Kakadeles

Congratulations to Dr. Kaitlyn Kakadeles for her dissertation, *The Characteristics of Award-Winning Public School Superintendents: Their Stories of Leadership* which earned her the Educator As Researcher Award.

NERA's Educator-As-Researcher Award is presented annually to an individual who has conducted a self-initiated research project or applied research findings to inform their own practice in an educational setting. The 2025 awardee was Dr. Kaitlyn Kakadeles, an English teacher in the Greenwich Public Schools, Greenwich, CT. She is a recent graduate of the Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership Program at Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, CT. She began her career in education 9 years ago and has served as a middle level classroom teacher and team leader in suburban, urban, and rural communities. Her doctoral program prepared her for a variety of research experiences, including quantitative and qualitative data analysis as well as various research opportunities, most notably, working as a research assistant, analyzing, and coding interviews and conducting case study research. As an educator and doctoral candidate, she became interested in effective leadership characteristics and chose to examine award-winning superintendents and their stories of success. Her research describes how these visionary leaders have transformed their communities.

Kaitlyn's nomination was based on her dissertation research, *The Characteristics of Award-Winning Public School Superintendents: Their Stories of Leadership*. Her Dissertation Committee Members were Marcia A. B. Delcourt, PhD (Chair); Catherine O'Callaghan, PhD; and Kristy Zaleta, EdD.



Abstract

This exploratory qualitative case study was used to identify leadership characteristics of award-winning public school superintendents through the telling of their stories. With superintendency longevity at an all-time low, there is a need to explore and use leadership qualities to inspire. Participants included 11 superintendents who received one or more state-wide awards for their leadership in a northeastern state in the past six years. Data collection tools included a demographic questionnaire, an observation at a district school board meeting, a review of artifacts, and a series of semi-structured interviews with each superintendent. A thematic approach was used to analyze the data. Finding 1: Know yourself, use your strengths to enhance your understanding of the community and effectively communicate with each stakeholder group. Finding 2: A superintendent sets and maintains the goals of the district using systematic organization to implement change and have an impact on the community. The results of this study provide suggestions to support and guide both aspiring and current leaders to enhance their leadership potential and effectiveness

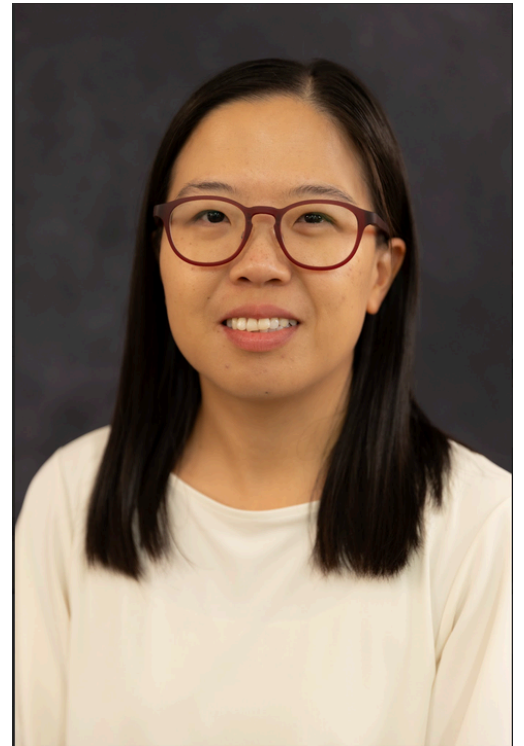
2025 Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Award

Kaijie Liu

Congratulations to **Kaijie Liu** and co-authors on the paper entitled, *Can GenAI Score Ethical Reasoning Essays? Evaluating Copilot with Interrater Agreement and Rasch Modeling*, for winning the 2025 Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Award.

The award-winning paper investigated the reliability and functionality of Microsoft Copilot, powered by GPT-4, in scoring ethical reasoning essays within the Eight Key Questions (8KQs) framework at a mid-Atlantic university in the United States. The research team compared ratings from human raters and Copilot using descriptive statistics, interrater reliability and agreement, and a rating scale many-facet Rasch model. Results showed that Copilot scored slightly more severely than the average human raters, though it did not emerge as an outlier. Copilot differentiated among scale categories consistently with the rubric. It agreed with human raters and contributed to rank-ordering on some rubric criteria. Findings highlighted both the potential and limitations of applying generative AI (GAI) in performance assessment and contributed to broader discussions regarding the role of GAI in higher education assessment practices.

Kaijie Liu will receive a NERA travel stipend to present this paper at the 2026 meeting of the American Educational Research Association. The paper was rated by the award committee members on its relevance, theoretical backing, clarity, design, analytical procedures, and presentation of results and conclusion, and received the highest average rating by the Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Award Committee.



The Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Award is named in honor of Lorne H. Woollatt, a distinguished New York State educator and NERA member. It is awarded annually, and a plaque is given to the recipient at the subsequent year's conference (October 2026). Research papers from the 2025 NERA conference were submitted by their authors to the award committee for this competitive award.

Thinking ahead? Be sure to watch for the 2026 call for Distinguished Paper Award submissions, which will be announced in October.

Any questions about the award can be directed to the committee chair, Rochelle Michel at nera.woollatt.award.submission@gmail.com.

57th Annual Conference

Keepin' it Real in the Age of AI

Tabitha Bellamy, PhD NERA President 25-26
 Taneshia Beverly, PhD; Conference Co- Chair
 Matthew James Madison, PhD; Conference Co- Chair
 Jordana Simmons Berwise, PhD; Conference Co- Chair

AI MEANS MORE THAN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE...

AI also refers to Anti-Intellectualism. The hostility or mistrust of intellectuals and intellectual pursuits attacks the merits of science, education, and literature. With this in mind, we request that conference attendees include their earned terminal degrees on registration to be printed on their conference badges as a stance against anti-intellectualism.

This year's conference will focus on the inclusion of innovations in Artificial Intelligence in educational research as well as the many ways that data integrity is being maintained by our members through their work

Conference Details

Trumbull Marriott
Shelton, CT
October 14th - 16th, 2026

Conference Timeline

Call for papers and Workshops
 March 11th - May 1st

Reviews
 May 22nd - July 24th

Announcement
August 17, 2026



PRE-CONFERENCE INVITED WORKSHOP PRESENTERS



Jermaine White III, EdS
Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services
Harnett County, NC



Maria Finger Elam, PhD
Coordinator of Data Strategy
Baltimore County, MD



Andrew Vassall, EdD
Cheltenham School District
Philadelphia, Pa

Let's Keep It Real: Not All Students Are Properly Housed

Public school educators and researchers who specialize in educating unhoused and highly mobile student populations



NAEHCY

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

Additional Conference Fun

10/14 Homecoming Parade

10/15 NERA Past President Pageant



Keynote Day 1
Frederick Engram, PhD
Farleigh Dickenson



Keynote Day 2
Emmanuel Cherilien, EdD
Dr. TANK EdDucates, LLC

Get to Know...Steve Sireci

The NERA Researcher will be featuring interesting pieces about members to showcase the many outstanding people in our organization. Our first feature highlights Dr. Stephen (Steve) Sireci.

Maura Maxfield interviewed Steve Sireci for this spotlight. Steve shared about a day in his life and how he ended up in his current position — with his customary sense of humor. Steve is a Distinguished Professor and Executive Director of the Center for Educational Assessment in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. In his own words, *“I have been a Professor at UMass since September 1995 when I was 8 years old. The job title started as Assistant Professor, then Associate Professor, Professor, and now Distinguished Professor. I think the next title is Extinguished Professor, but I am not sure.”* He is also a long-time NERA member and has held many positions in the organization.

Steve has been part of NERA since 1990. When asked about any particular conference memories that stand out, he shared, *“It was super fun playing my guitar with Kristen Huff playing harmonica, and accompanying Mara McFadden from JMU who has an amazing voice, and the many iterations we had of the Messickists, playing with Rob Cook, Katrina Roohr, and many others. I think I’m happiest at NERA when we are socializing at the bar or President’s reception. Many fun Karaoke nights, too! I think there may have been some conference presentations over the years, too.”*

I asked Steve about his recommendations to people who may be interested in working in this field. His answer is unsurprising given how kind and generous with his time he is, *“I have two recommendations that may seem contradictory. The first is never say no to friends or family, and therefore fit your work around them—not the other way around. The second recommendation is to try to say yes whenever you have an opportunity to help someone, or some organization, through your research or teaching expertise. There are so many opportunities out there and they are so rewarding.”*

When asked about a pop culture reference that could describe a day in his life, he responded, *“Bilbo Baggins certainly comes to mind. I flew under the radar for most of my career and was underestimated —then I found the magic ring, which was being in a place where I could collaborate with others— faculty, students, and practitioners. That made all the difference. The Grateful Dead’s The Other One is a pop reference some of the older readers may know, that could also be used to describe my journey.”*



Getting to Know Steve Sireci continued...

Steve didn't dream of being a Distinguished Professor at UMass as a child, in fact he shared, "My first memory of my career goal was to be a helicopter pilot. That never materialized. Next was Rock Star. That hasn't materialized—yet."

The goal to be a Rock Star may just be one NERA away — watch out for Steve rocking out at next year's conference, and if you know of a music talent scout be sure to invite them to NERA too! Steve shared some details about his background and job that might be helpful for others who wish to follow in his footsteps.

Brief job description, general industry for the job (i.e., higher education, measurement, K-12, nonprofit)

The job responsibilities are teaching, research, and service.

Please describe how you came to assume this position - did you actively seek it or were you recruited/invited?

I was working as Senior Psychometrician for the GED Testing Service and looking for a job with better opportunities. I saw the UMass job advertised and knew the Chair of the Psychometrics program, Ron Hambleton. He encouraged me to apply.

Did your prior professional experience and education directly relate to your current role or not? Please explain.

Yes. My Ph.D. is in psychometrics, and although it was in a Psychology Department, the coursework and training covered both educational and psychological testing.

Please take a few moments to describe a typical day in this role? What are your hours? Where do you work (remote or in person), who do you engage with? Is your work accomplished individually or with others? In an office or classroom?

My work day typically starts by going through my email. In fact, I try to do that before I go to bed to catch any critical emails I may not have answered during the day. I typically have 3-4 meetings a day. I try to schedule them after 10 a.m., to give me some time to respond to emails and prep for the meetings. In between meetings, I am writing to or connecting with others.

What surprised (or continues to surprise you) about this job?

The biggest surprise for me was how quickly I was connected to colleagues around the world. Since I started at UMass there has always been a strong presence of hard-working international students, and many colleagues from across the globe have visited UMass for a semester or longer to take classes, collaborate on research projects, and give seminars. Ron Hambleton was instrumental in starting the International Test Commission, and so virtually all ITC members became aware of UMass. Thanks to my work at UMass, I have very close friends throughout Europe (especially Spain, Sweden, and Turkey) and have made presentations in over 20 countries.

New Member Spotlight



Deirdre Rood, EdD

K-8 School Principal
St. Rose of Lima School in Haddon Heights, NJ
Adjunct Professor
William Patterson University
deidrerood@gmail.com

NERA Member since 2023

[LinkedIn](#)

Where do you call home? I am from Brooklyn, NY, but currently reside in Cinnaminson, NJ.

What's one of your favorite things about that place/your home? Cinnaminson is a great area where I feel like I am separated from the city, but Philly is only a short car ride away.

Tell us about your family and/or pets. I have one amazing son, who is currently a freshman at Chestnut Hill College studying Computer Science; an awesome stepson who recently graduated from Navy bootcamp and is stationed in Japan; and a wonderful, supportive fiancé who is there every step of the way.

Do you have any favorite family traditions? I have a yearly trip to Nags Head, OBX, and Lake George, NY.

What do you like to do in your free time? Read, avid hockey (Rangers) and soccer (Liverpool) fan, cooking, and playing Mahjong.

What's something you'd like to learn more about/spend more time doing? Crocheting

Tell us about an interesting place you've traveled to!

Ausable Chasm, also called the Grand Canyon of the Adirondacks. I have hiked it, and it is amazing what nature can do. I highly recommend it.

What is your favorite dish to cook or eat? My mom's traditional Sunday dinner of Macaroni and gravy, meatballs, and chicken cutlets.

Are there any books or podcasts you'd recommend? In my spare time, I love to read suspense and thriller novels—anything by Harlan Coben, Frieda McFadden, and Nora Roberts.

Do you have a favorite quote? "Let us remember: One book, one child, and one teacher can change the world."
Malala Yousafzai.

Interested in being considered for our next Member Spotlight? Learn more [here!](#)

Seasoned Member Spotlight



Felice D. Billups
(she/her/hers)

**Professor, Educational Leadership
Doctoral Program/Higher Education
Johnson & Wales University
Providence, RI
fbillups@jwu.edu**

NERA Member since 2008

[LinkedIn](#)



Where do you call home? Rhode Island

What's one of your favorite things about that place/your home? I can't imagine living anywhere without the ocean around me.

What do you like to do in your free time? I am a devoted gardener and cannot wait for the spring crocus bulbs to appear each February. For at least three seasons each year, I am in my garden whenever I have the chance, and every year I love planting new perennials and annuals. Of course, my battles with keeping the deer and rabbits at bay are perpetual...and they usually win!

Tell us about an interesting place you've traveled to! In the early 1980s, we traveled to London and environs for 10 days, and it was the best trip of my life. I am a lover of English history, and seeing all the landmarks and walking through the city was a dream come true for me.

Do you have a favorite quote? Jump, and the net will appear!

Is there a personal accomplishment you'd like to share? I am not sure it would be considered an accomplishment, but I have experienced three different careers since my 20s, and I have learned a great deal from taking risks and starting over several times. My first professional role was as an assistant curator of print and photographs in an archive; my second role was as a college administrator/educational researcher at a private art/design college; my third and current role is that of a university professor in a doctoral program. They were all very different, challenging, and interesting, and I grew tremendously from each experience.

Interested in being considered for our next Member Spotlight? Learn more [here!](#)

Graduate Student Lounge (GSIC) Update

Hi All,

I say a resounding YES to Spring!

We wanted to touch base with you about some goings on with the GSIC.

The Best Paper by a Graduate Student Award contest is an important GSIC event, as it not only comes with a \$250 prize (and an impressive plaque) but also honors the achievements and dignity of a graduate student who is fast becoming a rising star in our field! The process resembles the peer-review process that many of us curse until the cows come home. Yes, the publishing racket is real; it is the thorn that is rarely spoken about while you are in school. It is an opportunity to experience “a submission process,” which is a fantastic nugget to include on your CV. One thing I have learned is that anytime you can legitimately include something on your CV that passes the straight face test, do so with vigor!

If you are the first author on a paper you presented at the NERA 2025 Annual Conference, we encourage you to apply. Submit two copies of your paper to neragraduatestudents@gmail.com. One copy should be a blind copy devoid of all author-identifying information on the title page. The second copy should include a title page with the names, affiliations, and email addresses of all authors. Papers must be submitted by **Monday, May 4, 2026**. The winner of the 2025 Best Paper by a Graduate Student Award will be honored at the NERA 2026 Annual Conference, providing valuable recognition for your scholarly contributions.

During the 2025 conference, we introduced an initiative the committee has been developing—The GSIC Toolkit—which is an organic, digital resource that graduate students can access as a further layer of support for their graduate journey. It is a resource separate from their school that provides relevant, authentic information developed organically by peers and colleagues. The Toolkit is timely and accessible, kind of like a Wikipedia for NERA Graduate students. Well, not exactly on that scale, but you get the idea that it is YOU who this is for, and it is YOU who can add your content of tips, tricks, trials, tribulations in further support of your peers in NERA. An invitation to provide input to continue building on the [GSIC Toolkit](#) will be shared in the coming weeks.

Having graduate student representation on the NERA Board and across our organization is an important charge for the GSIC, especially considering how we refer to our committee. When we say, “Graduate Student Issues Committee,” many focus on the word “issues” as a loaded term with negative connotations. That said, it was discussed at the January 2026 NERA Board meeting to establish a framework to initiate a process to rename this committee to reflect a more positive tone about the opportunities for Graduate Students through their membership with NERA.

This is an exciting opportunity to reflect on the current role(s) for NERA Graduate Student members and what can be expected in your ROTI (return-on-time-investment). More information on the name change process will be shared as the initiative takes shape.

Much to my chagrin, I must share that I have made the difficult decision to step away from leadership and committee membership regarding the GSIC. Because my situation warrants an acute pivot, I have acted quickly on this decision. I want to thank you in advance for your understanding. Tricia Clarke, the previous GSIC Chair, has offered to step up and provide leadership until a new Chair can be identified. Thank you, Tricia. I want to thank you for the opportunity to serve NERA for these many years, and I look forward to serving again in the future.

Best,
Matthew Speno, Ed D.



Membership Committee Report

Shelby Perry, Membership Committee Chair, Matthew Lepore, Ariel Cerruto, Anna Sullivan

The Membership Committee is actively recruiting for this committee; it is a great one to be on! Over the last year, the committee worked on building a database of colleges in the New England area, which needs a little updating and more states added. NERA has partnered with the Society for Advancement of Management (SAM). Each year, they hold a conference in March, this year at New England Institute of Technology (NEIT). Within this partnership, SAM has added a new track, "Educational Research & Measurement" for paper/poster submissions.

We are looking forward to this partnership!



NERA Communications Committee Update

Shelby Perry, Chair

We are pleased to share that Dr. Yu Bao has stepped into the role of Chair of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (NERA) Communications Committee, and Archangel Gundula has transitioned into the role of Webmaster. We also extend our sincere appreciation to our team member, Shelby Perry, for her outstanding work managing NERA's social media presence. We warmly welcome requests, announcements, and ideas related to communications during the Spring term.

Kate Schaefer (James Madison University) successfully defended her dissertation, "Student Effort During a Low-Stakes Testing Session: A Mixed Methods Study of Time of Day and Test Order Effects." Her committee included two long-standing NERA members, Dr. Sara Finney and Dr. Dena Pastor. Congratulations, Dr. Kate Schaefer.

Stephanie A.N. Levin, Ed.D., Management Assistant of Student Affairs & Alumni Engagement at Rowan-Virtua School of Osteopathic Medicine, and author of "Picking Up the Pieces: Finding my Way as a Visually Impaired Woman in Higher Education" (2025), successfully defended her dissertation, Questions of Competence: A Heuristic Inquiry of Women Graduate Students with Invisible Disabilities in Male-Dominated Academic Fields." Congratulations, Dr. Stephanie A.N. Levin.

Please consider submitting your professional accomplishments to *The NERA Researcher* for recognition! News can be submitted year-round to theneraresearcher@nera-education.org and will be published in the next issue.

NERA October Board & Business Meeting Highlights

During the October conference, NERA leadership and members gathered for the annual Business Meeting and Board of Directors meetings to review the organization's health, celebrate accomplishments, and plan ahead for the next conference year.

Members received updates on NERA's strong financial position, recent infrastructure improvements, and conference participation. The 2025 conference welcomed over 200 attendees across professional, student, and retired member categories, with support from sponsors and fundraising efforts. Leadership election results were announced, awards were recognized, and committee chairs shared highlights from Mentoring, GSIC, Member Advocacy, Communications, and Membership outreach activities.

The Board of Directors meeting focused on long-term sustainability and member experience, including ongoing evaluation of NERA's membership, registration, and conference systems to ensure they remain cost-effective and responsive to member needs. Additional discussion centered on expanding pathways for student and early-career researcher engagement, strengthening leadership development and training opportunities, and using member feedback to guide future conference planning and site selection.

Looking ahead, members were invited to participate in committees, leadership roles, and upcoming initiatives, including new researcher training opportunities as they are developed, and to share feedback through post-conference surveys to help shape the future direction of NERA!



Innovative approaches for improved learning outcomes

Assessments • Accreditation and Certification • Improvement Services

Learn more at cognia.org

© 2025 Cognia, Inc.



Supporting the Next Generation of Medical Professionals

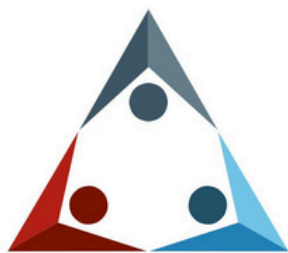
The AAMC developed and administers the Medical College Admission Test® (MCAT®) and the PREview® professional readiness exam, which test the foundational concepts, reasoning skills, and professional competencies students need to succeed in medical school.

The AAMC provides comprehensive resources to help learners prepare for and take both exams. Learn more at aamc.org/mcat and aamc.org/preview.

The MCAT and PREview exams are two of the many AAMC resources designed to help admissions officers make informed decisions about the academic and professional readiness of applicants. Learn more at aamc.org/admissions.

25-332 (09/25)

AAMC.ORG



DIA

Higher Education Collaborators



ADVANCING ASSESSMENT, **SUPPORTING OPTIMAL CARE**

Through research and collaboration, NBME is evolving how we evaluate and support learners, with a focus on applying new technology to develop assessments that measure and build the knowledge and skills needed to provide optimal, effective care to all.

innovationsinassessment.org



Leo D. Doherty Memorial Award for Outstanding Leadership and Service

2026 Call for Nominations

Hank Johnson, *NEIT*, Chair

The Leo D. Doherty Memorial Award is presented to a longstanding NERA member who exemplifies the qualities that Leo Doherty brought to NERA members, his colleagues, and students throughout his career. The award, instituted by the NERA Board of Directors in 1981, honors the memory of Leo Doherty. He was instrumental in developing and growing NERA as a professional association for educational research.

His ethical and humane leadership qualities encouraged others to pursue and achieve their goals. Thus, it is awarded to NERA members who have exhibited outstanding leadership and service to our organization.

Please nominate a NERA member exemplifying these qualities.

Send a nomination letter in Word or PDF format as an attachment via email to Hank Johnson (hjohnson@neit.edu) by June 30, 2025. The nomination letter should indicate the name of the nominee, the nominee's e-mail and mailing address, and a concise, compelling indication of the nominee's leadership and service to NERA. Please include input from at least three other NERA members about the nominee's leadership and service either in the nomination letter or separate ones.

BUROS
CENTER FOR TESTING

Thomas F. Donlon Memorial Award for Distinguished Mentoring

2026 Call for Nominations

Dr. Samuel Fancera, *William Paterson University*, Chair

The Thomas F. Donlon Memorial Award for Distinguished Mentoring was established in 2000 in recognition of Tom's long and valued contributions to NERA, particularly as a mentor to so many colleagues. Since then, the award has been presented annually to NERA members who have demonstrated distinction as mentors by guiding colleagues and helping them find productive paths to develop their careers as educational researchers.

Mentoring in education has been going on for centuries, and most of us can name a person who helped us move our careers along by being more than just a friend or colleague. That person may have been an advisor in developing your research agenda, or perhaps brought you to NERA for the first time after suggesting that you might be ready for a conference presentation.

Nominations are again being sought for this annual award. Nominees must be NERA members and may be nominated by any member(s) of NERA to whom they served as mentors. If you would like to see a member of NERA who was your mentor be recognized for their contributions to your success, send your nomination, including:

- a. A nomination letter
- b. Three to five letters of support indicating how the nominee distinguished themselves as a mentor.

The award will be presented at the annual NERA conference. Please contact the committee Chair if you have any questions about the Donlon Award or the nomination process. Send all nomination materials to Dr. Samuel Fancera via email at fanceras@wpunj.edu by June 1.

2026 Educator-As-Researcher Award

2026 Call for Nominations

Dr. Marcia A. B. Delcourt
Western Connecticut University
Chair, Educator-as-Researcher Award Committee

About the Award

The Educator-as-Researcher Award is presented annually to an educator who has conducted a self-initiated classroom research project or applied research findings to inform their own practice. The award recipient will present their research to a NERA audience and receive the award during a banquet at the conference.

The nominee must be a PK-12 educator who conducted a school-related research project with their students, faculty, local community partners, or constituents to improve educational practices. The project must be conceptualized, developed, and implemented within the nominee's context and practices and must have undergone at least one cycle of trial and evaluation. The project should also be related to a clearly defined theoretical focus and represent an innovation that has led to concrete change in educational practice. The research, conducted during the past two years, could be part of a thesis or dissertation if the educator is primarily responsible for the development and implementation of the project. Research topics may vary but should have some importance in the nominee's branch of education. The theory underlying the research, as well as methods of instruction or implementation, data collection, and analysis, should be well articulated and documented by the nominee.

Send the application cover sheet (see next page), and narrative as a Word document to Dr. Marcia A. B. Delcourt, Chair, Educator-As-Researcher Award Committee (delcourtm@wcsu.edu) no later than June 1.

BUROS

CENTER FOR TESTING



We turn learners
into *earners.*

Our **career readiness** courses aren't simply reading, writing, & arithmetic.

Modern employers value **social savvy** & **digital literacy** on top of a strong foundation of academic expertise.

No matter where your career path leads, WIN can help you build the ***skills to pay the bills.***



Career Readiness
Courseware &
Credentials

GET **WORK READY** WITH US AT WINLEARNING.COM

Advance Your Education Career at **Johnson & Wales**

Think, learn and perform as an educational leader through JWU's Doctor of Education programs. Complete two years of coursework via a convenient hybrid weekend schedule followed by a dissertation grounded in a problem of practice.

Ed.D. in Educational Leadership — Higher Education

Our dedicated faculty will support your leadership growth in collegiate environments through a blend of academic and work-based learning in a cohort environment.

Ed.D. in Educational Leadership — Elementary-Secondary Education

Prepare for career advancement through collaborative academic and work-based study, gaining the skills you need to transform your school community.



JWU.EDU/GRADUATE



THE AMERICAN BOARD OF SURGERY

Promoting surgical excellence since 1937

The American Board of Surgery serves the public and the specialty of surgery by providing leadership in surgical education and practice, by promoting excellence through rigorous evaluation and examination, and by promoting the highest standards for professionalism, lifelong learning, and the continuous certification of surgeons in practice.

www.absurgery.org | [@AmBdSurg](https://twitter.com/AmBdSurg) | www.facebook.com/AmBdSurg
1617 John F. Kennedy Blvd., Suite 860 | Philadelphia, PA | 19103 USA

Fostering Greater Student Learning For Over 20 Years

Supporting states and local districts across the country to design and implement high-quality assessment and accountability systems.

X@NCIEA1

www.nciea.org



31 MOUNT VERNON STREET • DOVER, NH 03820 • 603.516.7900



Pearson Assessment for Learning Suite—PALS

Classroom assessments that inform.
Student data that empowers.

The Pearson Assessment for Learning Suite is a comprehensive portfolio of K–12 assessments to support educators, caregivers, and students in improving their educational outcomes. Our suite includes state standards-based measures for interim and formative purposes, skill-based screeners, and progress monitoring tools to support MTSS/RTI programs. As part of a system of assessments with the additional screeners for early literacy, dyslexia, and SEL/behavior, these invaluable tools form powerful insights into the needs of your students.



Then COVID hit. My daughter was being homeschooled, which meant I had a front-row seat to her entire educational landscape. Her speech pathologist came to the house to administer a standardized assessment of expressive language to my non-verbal child, who has no consistent means of communicating independently. In my mind, I am thinking “here we go again,” and my heart hurts for my child.

Something different happened. The teacher made modifications to the assessment so she could participate in the assessment. And the score on that assessment indicated a very high level of understanding of text, and a higher level of cognitive function than has ever been demonstrated. Her teachers started to see her differently, and new options opened up; conversations about college are being had.

Next, someone steps in and says that with the modifications made to that test, the score is not valid. The construct has changed. It is no longer a test of expressive language since the student did not produce the text themselves. Of course, as a psychometrician, I agree that the construct has changed. But just because the score might not represent the degree of expressive language does not mean that it is devoid of information. Yet, the score itself was dismissed, along with any information it might have included.

As I reflect on these two experiences, I find it interesting that in the first assessment, there was no conversation of construct-irrelevant variance, and that the construct itself was not being measured. But the conclusion was that because the assessment wasn't modified, the score was legitimate. In the second case, the only conversation was around construct-irrelevant variance. There was no conversation about what information was gained from that test. In both cases, there was a blind application of assessment in some way, with little thought or consideration of what was relevant for my child.

Consequences

These examples speak to the critical importance of examining the consequences of assessment, especially when applied to those who are most vulnerable. How can we be sure of what someone knows or does not know? What are the appropriate measures and criteria for determining that?

As I think about my daughter and my students who struggle, I wonder how often our assessments are designed to be deficit-focused rather than strength-focused. All assessments contain elements of what a student can or cannot do. But how are those assessments framed? How are the results framed? In terms of strength or deficit? In my experiences with special education, every assessment I have encountered and every meeting I have attended have focused on what my child cannot do. I do not need an assessment to tell me that my child cannot walk, that my child cannot speak, that her functional age in these categories is well below her peers. Being continually told what you cannot do or how far behind you are is traumatizing for a student. The result of this trauma varies from student to student, but is often decreased effort and engagement, or even depression or anxiety.

What if there was another way? What if we could use assessments to help those most in need of help, those with the most complex support needs? What impact would we have on the lives of students if they heard of their gifts and their talents, their strengths and superpowers? Research consistently shows that when students receive positive, strengths-based feedback and are encouraged to develop their talents, they demonstrate higher motivation, greater persistence, and improved academic performance. However, do we really need research to know that students will respond more positively in an environment where they feel seen and heard?

Criteria

Throughout my career, I looked at my peers and constantly felt I was failing. I was so focused on trying to be Steve Sireci (which is not easy!) that I forgot to be Lisa Keller. All of the energy I was putting into being someone else was robbing me of the energy I needed to be me. I learned that if I changed the criteria by which I measured myself, I could see myself as capable, worthy, and important, and that pesky imposter syndrome began to fade. When the criteria used to evaluate myself aligned with my values, the energy I gained spilled over into every area of my life. This alignment allowed me to flourish in all aspects of my professional and personal life.

This experience led me to wonder what I/we could do differently for those who don't fit the mold. How can we assess students according to meaningful criteria that would allow them to see themselves as capable, worthy, and valuable, rather than deficient and behind? How much energy are students wasting on trying to be something that they are not, which limits what they can obtain? By allowing flexibility in how we define their success, we can liberate energy to fulfill expectations of students; when students see themselves as successful, this flows into all aspects of life.

I know there is hope in our field. The rise of culturally responsive assessments (e.g., Randall, 2025), co-designed assessments (e.g., Smith et al., 2025), and alternative modes of assessment (e.g., Dube et al., 2023) provides hope for a new way of thinking about assessment for all people. This progress is slow and can feel glacial at times, but we are moving forward.

Illuminating the Margins

The theme of the conference was Illuminating the Margins: Education for all Minds. Who are these groups that are on the margins? They include, but are not limited to:

- Emergent bilinguals / multilingual learners
- Learners with complex support needs
- Neurodivergent
- Medically fragile
- Incarcerated
- Migrant, homeless, foster, and highly mobile students
- Rural/remote/low-bandwidth contexts
- Indigenous communities

All of these groups would thrive with a broader definition of success. I have chosen to focus on learners with complex support needs, the so-called special needs student, based on my personal experiences with my daughter.

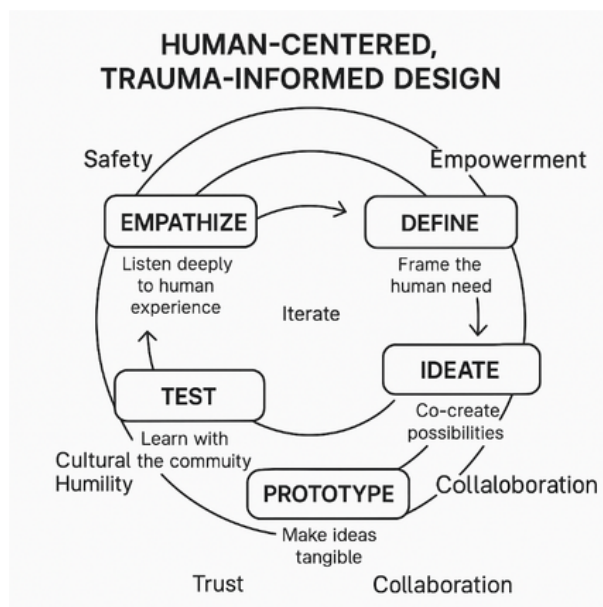
A New Assessment Model: Human-centered, Trauma-Informed Assessment

Carol and Matthew Newell, the directors of the Family Hope Center, assess neurodevelopment in individuals and develop personalized treatment plans to heal injured parts of the brain or create new pathways to increase function for their clients. The type of assessment they do can only be described as an example of the Human-centered, trauma-informed assessment that I imagine.

A human-centered, trauma-informed assessment draws on elements of human-centered design (Interaction Design Foundation, 2021) and trauma-informed practices (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014) to create an assessment that is useful, strength-based, and empowering to its users. Although a full description of these two foundational ideas is beyond the scope of this article, some key elements are (1) people-focused and (2) understanding and solving the right problem. If we reflect on the two assessment scenarios for my daughter, they both failed to focus on who she is and what is relevant for her.

I highlight two trauma-informed principles: collaboration and empowerment. Collaboration aligns with the people-focused aspect of human-centered design, where power is minimized by including relevant stakeholders (the student or the student’s caregivers) in decision-making and responsibility, creating a partnership and ensuring the student does not feel acted upon. This can also contribute to “buy-in” and motivation from the student.

Figure 1 below illustrates what a graphic of a human-centered, trauma-informed assessment might look like. Important to note is the cyclical nature of the assessment: data is collected, things are revised, the assessment is iterated, until meaning can be made.



As I mentioned, the Family Hope Center does this well. Their assessment, or “Chart”, as it is called, is an extensive checklist that can be used as an assessment of brain function based on observable skills. For a full description, readers are referred to Newell & Newell (2021) or to www.familyhopecenter.com.

After the NERA conference, I had the opportunity to bring my daughter to the Family Hope Center. I wanted to share that she left that assessment feeling empowered. When she returned to school with new plans in place, the staff commented on how much happier she was, how she held her head higher. This result is what assessment should offer. As a parent of a student with complex support needs, I didn’t feel traumatized or beat down by the assessment, but I felt something I hadn’t felt in a long time: Hope.

Metrics

While traditional psychometrics might have a place in this framework, a broader view of psychometric quality and success applies to the assessment’s evaluation as well. Because these assessments typically won’t be given in large-scale settings, there are alternative ways to evaluate the quality.

Data Collection

Students with complex support needs typically require more time and energy to complete assessment tasks. As such, it is important that minimal data collection is conducted and that the data that is collected is as informative and relevant as possible. Explaining to the student what you are doing and why you are doing it is very important, and contextualizing the task can help increase buy-in.

Validity

First and foremost, validity must be viewed primarily in terms of consequences. Currently, in most psychometric assessments, validity related to test consequences receives the least attention in validation efforts. This is not surprising due to the difficulty in obtaining data to support this type of validity evidence. However, in the context of marginalized populations, where assessment trauma might exist, testing consequences are the primary form of validity evidence. The simple question of whether the assessments heal or harm the student must be asked. Does it contribute to the ongoing narrative of deficiency, or does it promote the student’s empowerment and worth?

Second, participatory validity should be considered. To create people-focused assessments that address the right questions, stakeholders (students, caregivers, teachers, etc.) must be involved in defining the goals, purpose, tasks, outcomes, and interpretations. These cannot be top-down assessments done “to” a student but must be done “with” a student.

Success

Success on these assessments should not be measured by a score or a performance band that only underscores a lack of achievement or a deficit in understanding. The success should come from gaining knowledge that helps determine where the student is and what the next steps are. Furthermore, and most importantly, success comes from: (1) Participants feeling safe and cared for in the assessment: this means they feel like they are treated as capable and worthy, (2) Students demonstrate greater engagement and self-efficacy post-assessment. This indicates that the assessment reinforced strengths rather than illustrated deficits (again), (3) Evidence of cultural and linguistic alignment verified by community review. This helps students feel that their context matters.

Conclusion

I love the idea of a world where people like my daughter, and all those who don't fit the mold, feel exceptional and not less than. Isn't that all of us? Assessments highlight strengths, not limitations, and provide a roadmap for improvement.

Where everyone can believe, as Taylor Swift sings, "I'm the only one of me—baby, that's the fun of me" (Swift, 2019). And I believe that together we can find that beautiful, beautiful life—one that shimmers with innocent light—when learning is fun again.

References

- Dube, M., Masengu, R., Sibanda, S., & Mandongwe, L. (2023). Assessment: Higher Education Institutions' innovative online assessment methods beyond the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Chandos Information Professional Series, Digital Teaching, Learning and Assessment, Chandos Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-323-95500-3.00010-9>.
- Interaction Design Foundation. (2021, June 14). What is Human-Centered Design (HCD)? IxDF Interaction Design Foundation. <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/human-centered-design>.
- Newell, M., & Newell, C. (2021). Healing Your Child's Brain: A Proven Approach to Helping Your Child Thrive. BenBella Books.
- Smith, A., McConnell, L., Iyer, P., Allman-Farinelli, M., & Chen, J. (2025). Co-designing assessment tasks with students in tertiary education: a scoping review of the literature. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 50(2), 199-218.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Center for Trauma-Informed Care. (2015). Trauma-informed approach. Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>
- Swift, T. (2019). Me!. [Song]. On Lover. Republic Records.
- Swift, T. (2025). Eldest Daughter. [Song]. On The Life of a Showgirl. Republic Records.

95 Years of NERA

Barbara J. Helms, PhD

Last spring, Lisa Keller asked me to give a keynote at this year's 2025 conference about the history of NERA. Since I have been attending longer than most, she thought I ought to know something about it. I joined NERA in 1978 when I entered grad school at the University of Connecticut. I attended my first conference in 1981 in Ellenville, NY. I had never been to a professional conference before and could only attend for one day rather than the entire event. However, it had such an impact on me that, in 1984, when Scott Brown and Rich Schwab were the co-chairs, I offered to help and was assigned to edit and type the program—on a typewriter—which included the abstracts. Yes, in the early days, everything was typed, copied, and mailed via snail mail. But I'll get back to that ...

Some time ago, someone gave me a copy of a paper presented at the 1955 conference that marked its 25th anniversary. I expected it to be about NERA, but it was actually about NERA's former identity, the Educational Research Association of New York State, known as ERANYS. The organization was founded in 1930 and became the Northeastern Educational Research Association in 1958. While the 2025 conference was the 56th, suggesting it was founded around 1970, I'm calling it the 95th since, to me, it began in 1930.

Some interesting points: the first female president was elected in 1980. In 1998, I became the 10th female president, so we caught up pretty well. The first Black president was Roscoe Brown in the 1960s.

When we were still holding our conference in the Catskills, I sat next to a Black woman from New York during dinner. We started talking, and she said that the reason Black people didn't attend NERA was that they preferred to see people who "looked like them." I never saw her at NERA again, but I believe she would be surprised to see how much has changed now.

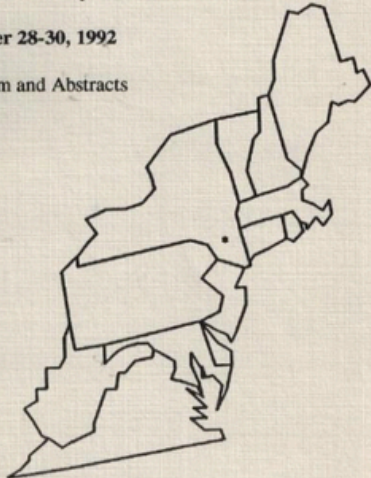
At the time I was program co-chair (1988-89), with Judy Kull, there were only two co-chairs responsible for the program. They were responsible for selecting and securing a keynote (who did not receive a stipend only free room and board), pre-sessions, and working with the hotel on logistics. They sent the call for proposals in the spring issue of the NERA Researcher via U.S. mail. The proposals were sent back to the co-chairs (paper copy, snail mail), who sorted them, determined the appropriate reviewers, and sent them to the reviewers. Once reviewed, they were returned to the co-chairs for sorting into the program, and letters were sent to the proposers regarding the acceptance or rejection of their proposals. All of this was typed (on a typewriter) on NERA letterhead, placed in a NERA envelope, then sent through the U.S. postal service. Once the program was set, someone had to type it – on a typewriter, take it to a printer, and bring the copies to the conference to hand out at the registration table. Now you can get it online and have it on your phone during the conference.

NORTHEASTERN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

23rd Annual Conference

October 28-30, 1992

Program and Abstracts

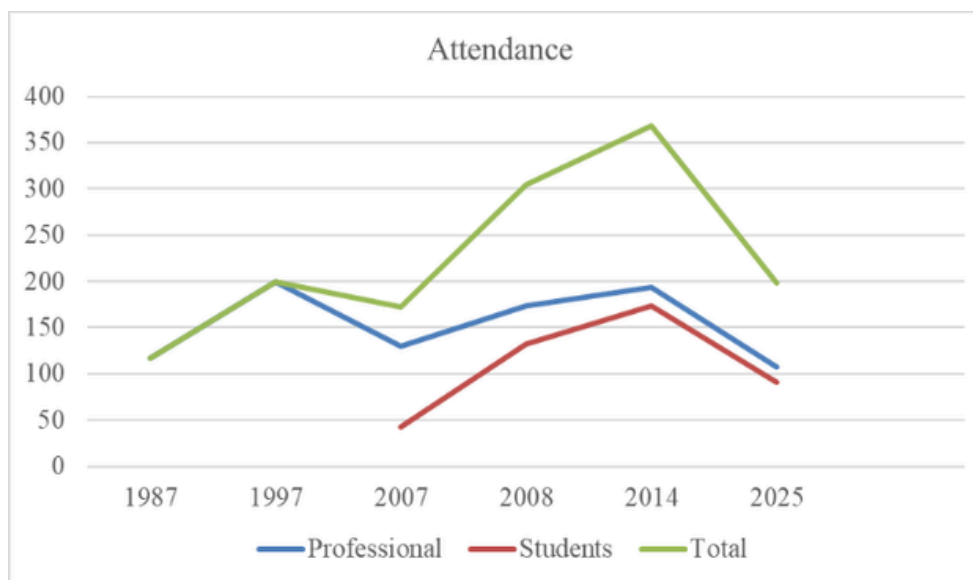


*The Nevele Country Club, Ellenville, New York

The program included all the sessions, the abstracts for all the presentations, and an index so you could look for people you knew. Finally, in 2005, everyone's email address was listed.

The presenters had to have a physical paper – we did not have PowerPoint, so we used overheads. You were expected to bring multiple copies (15–20) of your paper to distribute to attendees of your session.

To give you some idea of attendance at NERA back then and now, in 1987, 35 papers and five symposia were submitted; in 1997, 65 papers, 15 symposia, and 10 research-in-progress proposals were submitted. FYI, Research in Progress papers were those that the authors were still working on, which might be finished by the time of the conference, or that they were still working on and needed a little extra help. It was an early version of our current mentoring. In 2008, there were 146 paper proposals and 18 symposia.



In 1987, the conference had 117 attendees, and by 1997, this number had increased to 200. Attendance has varied over time; in 2007, 130 professionals and 42 students attended. In 2008, attendance increased to 305, comprising 173 professionals and 132 graduate students. (We also started having a few retirees.) The most recent numbers I have are for 2014: 194 professionals and 174 graduate students.

I want to give you an idea of the papers that were presented over the years. I have selected these randomly by simply choosing a page from the program.

1981 Adult Minority and Working Class Students: A Need for New Questions. A Review of the Literature and Implications for Further Research

1993 Perceptions of Caring Teachers from the Perspective of the Middle School Child An Assessment of Ethics and the Ethics of Assessment (Steve Sireci)

1997 The Effect of Computer Technology on the Achievement of 12th Grade Females Enrolled in a Basic Mathematics Class

Validation of Early Childhood Teachers' Attitudes Toward Science Teaching Scale (Research in Progress)

2005 Using Metacognitive Strategy for Discussion and Analysis of Teaching Cases

Finding an Impressionist Moment in the Digital Classroom

In 2015, there was a GSIC Session titled "Exploring Different Job Areas and Developing Effective Job-Seeking Skills" – sound familiar to anyone?

In 2020 and 2021, the NERA conferences were held virtually. Nevertheless, we still had great sessions. When planning the 2020 conference, COVID was an unknown. The program co-chairs and Ross Markle had to think innovatively and make adjustments. It was also free. I was out of the country – unexpectedly, thanks to COVID-19, but I still managed to be there. – A little time zone issues, but otherwise it was great.



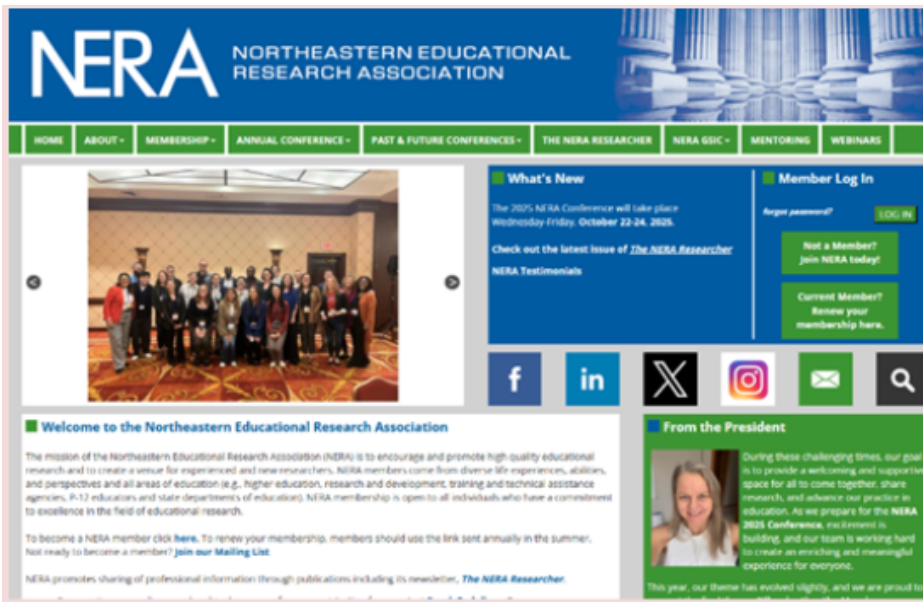
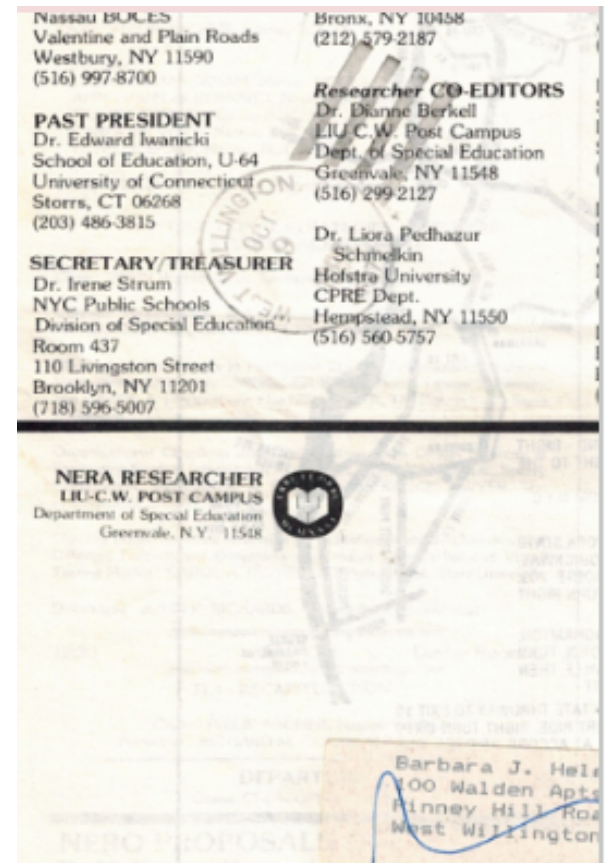
In 2020, “A Good Dissertation is a Finished Dissertation, but What Comes Next? Post-Dissertation Potential” – another GSIC session. In 2021, Steve Holtzman had some prior knowledge and a plan when we went virtual again, and it was a terrific conference.

A couple of presidential addresses over the years included: Scholarship and Pedagogy: A Evolving Synergy in 1995 and Educational Research: Does it Make a Difference? in 1997. One I thought was quite interesting was in 2015, Choose Your Own (Data) Adventure: Perils and Pitfalls, and Lots of Promise. I also discovered that some presidents just referred to it as a Presidential Address. Mine is called “First do no harm!”

When I joined NERA in 1978, the NERA Researcher was a newsletter that came to you via snail mail, and it looked like this. It is from the February 1985 issue of the Researcher. In 1982, NERA published a special edition of the Researcher to promote educational research and support new scholars with their research efforts. The publication was called “Annual Journal of the Northeastern Educational Research Association, Special Edition, New Scholars and Their Work.” I’m not sure how the papers were selected, but I was fortunate that the paper I presented the previous year was chosen along with six others.

It took NERA a while to go green, but once we got started, we moved ahead fairly quickly, and by 2007, we had established the website and the logo. In 2007, NERA was quite busy. First, our website, as you know it, went live.

Moreover, in 2009, the Researcher went live. (People could request to receive a hardcopy by mail—not many did. Finally, in 2012, we updated the format and stopped making it available in hardcopy.)



Another significant move in 2007 was the decision to leave the Catskills in NY State after 77 years. Over the years, we held the conference in a variety of locations across the Catskills.

Some we left and returned to, and others changed management over the years. The first place I went to was called the Fallsview. There was a waterfall, and people used to walk up there after lunch or after dinner. It has a lovely view:

Other places included the Granit, Nevele, and Hudson Valley Resort and Spa, which had been the Fallsview. The 2008 NERA conference was held at the Marriott Hotel in Rocky Hill, Connecticut. We stayed in Rocky Hill until 2013, and in 2014, after it became a Sheraton (it's now owned again by Marriott), we moved again to the Marriott in Trumbull, CT, where we have remained "so far."



In 1980, the Leo D. Doherty Award was established to recognize members who had shown outstanding leadership and service to NERA. I know there are some past Doherty award recipients in the room – please stand up. Jonathan Steinberg was the 2025 Doherty award recipient (on the right).



Another award that was established in 1980 is the Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Award. This award is given to a paper presented at the conference. The winning paper is automatically placed in a session of distinguished papers from other regional associations at the next AERA conference. The winner receives a stipend (\$500) for travel expenses to attend AERA, wherever it is held in the spring, and a plaque. If you are presenting a paper at this conference, be sure to check out the submission requirements. In 1992, NERA established the Teacher-as-Researcher award, which was later renamed the Educator-as-Researcher award.

In 2000, NERA established the Thomas F. Donlon Award for Mentoring, named in memory of a great NERA member and mentor. Any Donlons in the room? The 2025 Donlon award recipient was Hank Johnson (on the left in the photo).

And on that note, I would like to tell you about a survey I piloted recently. I sent an email to some friends who have been coming to NERA for a while and asked them the following questions. What brought you to NERA the first time you attended the conference? When was it? Where was it? Were you nervous? Were you presenting?

The answers revealed a long timeline, with the most recent event being in 2018, followed by 2008, 1999, 1990, 1981, and 1977. As a researcher, I'd say that was a pretty good sample. Most came to NERA as graduate students, although one came as a first-year faculty member, and another, a more experienced faculty member, came at the request of their Program Director. Most were presenting, but only one shared that they were nervous. To quote: "I presented a paper on ... something?... I was terrified. I must have practiced 4,932 times!" Another was presenting a paper, and I was the discussant. Of course, he didn't know. Most came when we were in the Catskills and remembered partying at the Safari Lounge. Nice name!! Fun!!

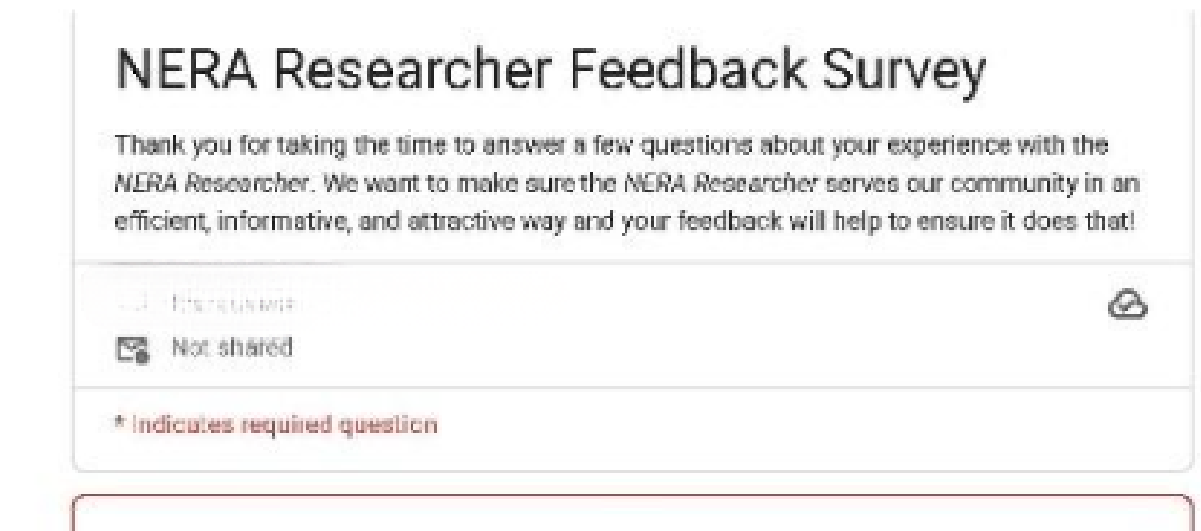
My second question was, what did you think while you were there? Quotes: "First was the camaraderie." Another, "It was loads of fun, and I was meeting a lot of great people." "The greatest impression I had was not only the camaraderie, but I seem to always have creative ideas while at NERA. I think it could be from all the graduate student energy!" "The other conferences I had attended were huge, so NERA was a very nice surprise! One hallway and so many friendly faces, it was amazing." "One thing that struck me ... was how incredibly welcoming the community was, a community that was diverse and experienced and crossed many educational industries."

My final question was, 'What do you think now?' What has changed? Good? Not Good? "I am so proud of how NERA has grown. The research presented is consistently excellent, and we've expanded the northern borders all the way to Virginia!" "The biggest change has been the higher percentage of measurement students and faculty, the presence of industry (as graduate students like me grow up and get jobs and can't miss NERA even well into our careers), and the improved locale." And "NERA is my favorite conference."

I want to add another word about service! Service in NERA is essential because we are a volunteer organization—no one gets paid, and we handle everything ourselves. So, we have officers and committees. I have served in all the offices and most of the committees at one point or another over the years, and I can tell you that I get even more out of it than I put in. First, there's the experience you gain from sharing your knowledge and skills. Second, you have the chance to meet your fellow members and get involved in a wonderful organization. Oh? Did I forget to mention fun? If you would like to get involved in NERA, there are several committees you might want to join. They are described on the website under the About section. Take a look ...

Another benefit I experienced through my NERA membership was landing a job. I already had a job and wasn't looking to change, but someone I met here approached me — and wow!

Finally, I need to talk to you about the Researcher. We have posted a survey about the Researcher on our website, and we would really appreciate hearing from you. We want to improve it and make it the best it can be; we would love to know what you would like to see added or changed. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScj6W-HJMUIGhFEwgWxBXpK_RRL-nilz7Ofe8Uv75vOMtXDVw/viewform?pli=1



The image shows a screenshot of a Google Form titled "NERA Researcher Feedback Survey". The form has a white background with a light gray border. The title is in a large, bold, black font. Below the title is a paragraph of text: "Thank you for taking the time to answer a few questions about your experience with the NERA Researcher. We want to make sure the NERA Researcher serves our community in an efficient, informative, and attractive way and your feedback will help to ensure it does that!". Below the text is a section with a red outline, containing the text "1 question" and "Not shared" with a lock icon. At the bottom of this section is a red asterisk followed by the text "* Indicates required question".



Education for
a socially just
world.

- Choose from 16 different areas of study at the master's or doctoral level.
- Conduct advanced research in collaboration with faculty, or join one of the college's 7 research centers and initiatives.

umass.edu/education

UMassAmherst
College of Education



**THE AMERICAN
BOARD OF SURGERY**

