Creating a New Vision for the Future:
A Report from the Blue Ribbon Commission
Revised Report, February 1, 2006

Introduction
Leaders representing the major professional organizations involved with developmental education and learning assistance were invited to conduct a strategic analysis of the field and to reflect upon these organizations in particular. These leaders are members of an ad hoc task force called the **Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC)**. They were appointed by the professional organizations that are members of the American Council of Developmental Education Associations (ACDEA). The ACDEA charged the BRC with conducting a strategic analysis of the profession and to report their findings back for guidance regarding potential planning decisions by the ACDEA member organizations. This report is intended as a catalyst for conversation and reflection at this crucial time.

BRC Delegates and Co-Authors of the Report
The BRC delegates were appointed by participating member associations or organizations of the American Council of Developmental Education Associations (*Association for the Tutoring Profession, College Reading and Learning Association, National Association for Developmental Education, National Center for Developmental Education, National College Learning Center Association, and National Tutoring Association*).

David Arendale (BRC Chair), Assistant Professor, General College, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Minneapolis, MN

Hunter Boylan, Director and Professor, National Center for Developmental Education, Reich College of Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC

Nancy Bornstein (BRC Vice Chair), Director, Instructional Services, Alverno College, Milwaukee, WI

Kathy Carpenter, Emeriti, University of Nebraska at Kearney

Michael Chambers, Director, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

Sandra Drewes, Resource Coordinator and Coordinator of the Kellogg Institute, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC

Johanna Dvorak (BRC Secretary), Director of Educational Support Services, Tutoring and Academic Resource Center, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI

Jackie Harris, Learning Center Study Strategies & Writing Coordinator, Ball State University, Muncie, IN

Sherry Lusk, English Instructor, Northwest Mississippi Community College, Developmental English, Senatobia, MS

Jane McGrath, Emeriti, Paradise Valley Community College, Phoenix, AZ

Vashti Muse, Reading Instructor, Hinds Community College, Raymond, MS

Beth Nikopoulos, Director, Center for Independent Study, Instructional Support, and Outreach Services, Brookhaven College, Dallas, TX

Jan Norton, Director, Center for Academic Resources, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Oshkosh, WI

Laura Symons, Coordinator, Learning Center, Piedmont Virginia Community College, Charlottesville, VA

Jim Valkenberg, Director, Tutoring/Learning Center, Delta College, University Center, MI

Lynell Williams, Coordinator, Tutoring & Learning Center. University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Section One
Overview of the Blue Ribbon Commission

Organizations Represented on the BRC:
Association for the Tutoring Profession, College Reading and Learning Association, National Association for Developmental Education, National Center for Developmental Education, National College Learning Center Association, and National Tutoring Association.

Background of the BRC:
The Blue Ribbon Commission conducted telephone and face-to-face meetings beginning in 2004 to prepare this report. The participating BRC members contributed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) for this strategic review. This report began to take shape at the BRC meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on October 7 and 8, 2005. The report has been revised since the initial meeting resulting in its present format. The BRC has a website where information about the ad hoc task force is available and reports such as this one are available for the general public.

Overview of the SWOT Report:
To generate information and analysis of the field of developmental education and learning assistance and the major organizations that represent the field, the SWOT organizational strategy was used. SWOT is a common strategic planning process that focuses on examining an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. First, a global analysis relating to the current status of the developmental education and learning assistance field was conducted regarding strengths and weaknesses (*section two of this report*). Then, the analysis was focused more narrowly on the major professional associations that represent the field (*sections three, four, and five of this report*). In this stage, the analysis was extended to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats confronting these major organizations that are represented on the Blue Ribbon Commission. The analysis did not seek to identify the differences among the organizations, but rather the collective impact of each regarding the four elements of the SWOT analysis. An executive summary of both discussions is presented in this report.

The Blue Ribbon Commission acknowledges the collective achievements of the professionals in the field and of the related organizations. It opens a door to the work ahead. This BRC report reflects not only the immense vitality of the profession but also the immense commitment it takes to keep the profession moving forward toward greater excellence and distinction. This report is submitted with deep respect for all involved and with the best of intentions to further the common good and serve as a catalyst for discussion by individuals and leaders of the profession.

Section Two
Summary of Strengths and Weaknesses in the Field

The field of academic learning support is rich in strengths. It is an area which provides access for diverse student populations. Increased academic achievement and student persistence rates are improved through learning assistance programs. The field contains quality-credentialed professionals who are altruistic, hard-working, student-centered, visionary, flexible, passionate, and dedicated. As a result, there is a documented history of higher student academic success, higher degree completion, higher beginning salaries, increased access to higher-level employment opportunities, and increased quality of life. Within the field, the personnel have professional development options in the forms of conferences, training workshops, research, publications, organizations, networking, and access to pre-existing knowledge in other fields. Personnel and programs are often recognized by state higher education officials, legislators, and the press. Finally, the field is collaborative and flexible with initiatives that extend from within the university setting to P-12 and into the workforce.

There are also weaknesses in the field of learning support. Funding is a common problem with little access to grants or limited soft money funding. Negative perceptions exist of the field. Learning support professionals often lack prestige, are marginalized, and are too-often relegated to working part-time. The terminology connected to the field is also frequently perceived negatively. Along these lines, the learning assistance professionals do not effectively advocate for programs on campus or with legislators. There is also limited access to relevant graduate programs, resources, and sabbaticals. There is generally not support for conducting research in this area or good use of the research that exists. Many are not trained to conduct rigorous program evaluation or research studies; they find themselves unsure about how to measure success. Additionally, they frequently have additional time demands with heavy teaching loads.

The following strengths of the field were identified:
- Programs enhance access for diverse students
- Asset to improving academic achievement and student persistence
- Hard-working and dedicated professionals are members of the organizations
- Professional development options are available
- Increasing scholarship concerning impact of the field on improved student achievement
- Increasing recognition of the organizations by some stakeholders
- Increased role with other institutional initiatives, workforce learning, and P-16 programs

The following weaknesses of the field were identified:
- Decreased access to grants, soft money, and state financial support
- Negative perceptions of the field
- Lack of sufficient professional development
- Ineffective advocacy with state legislators for programs or students who are academically underprepared
- Insufficient research documenting the success of programs
- Ineffective ability to clearly define the field for stakeholders

Section Three
Summary of Strengths and Weaknesses of the Organizations

Taken together, the organizations present a picture of a constellation which is greater than the sum of the stars. The groups are unique but have overlapping components. As a whole, they offer members services in the areas of recognition, professional development, networking, publications, forums for collaboration/exchange, conferences, interest groups, and websites. Within the organizations there is a focus on professionalism through advancing standards and seeking certifications. The organizations are well organized with governing boards, constitutions, and bylaws based upon an ethical foundation. Scholarship has grown over time through the research and publications generated. A number of centers and organizations such as the National Center for Developmental Education (NCDE) and Learning Support Centers in Higher Education (LSCHE) disseminate best practices and research studies. Efforts are ongoing to maintain ACDEA and the concomitant reciprocal agreements among the organizations. Certainly, the impact of the dedication of the members needs to be acknowledged as the backbone of the organizations.

As a weakness, the demographic picture of the personnel within the organizations is largely aging, mostly white females. Few younger people are becoming members of the professional associations. Many individuals experience duplication among the associations that results in a hardship regarding time, money, and loyalty being split. At present, only a small number of individuals are involved in the organizations compared to the potentially large number of professionals in the field who could be active members.

This concern leads into a broader and more significant weakness of the present structure of organizations. The organizations often duplicate activities and actions including conference topics, organization services. and leadership positions. As a result, competition is created among the organizations. The danger of this competition is that the members suffer with expenses relating to duplication of membership, conflicting conferences (*manifesting in more expense or time away from the job*), and confusing/overlapping certifications. All in all, there is a mixed image that is presented to the members and to related political entities. The limited resources within the organizations and the learning assistance budgets at universities are stretched too thin with the number of current organizations. It impacts the leadership, membership, expertise, scholarship, and political voice of the organization. Not only are the organizations' services stretched too far, they are not comprehensive enough. The organizations could provide different levels of professional development for members at different stages within the field. There could be more of an organizational focus toward accessing services via the internet and through technology and drawing adjuncts into the foal would be advantageous. Promoting a focus on evaluation/research and professional development would be healthy steps to encourage members to take. In summary, the current arrangement of organizations lacks the proactive approach that is critical for meeting the needs of the membership, the changing cultural climate at colleges and universities, the exploding technological trends in the society, and projecting a unifying, powerful political stand.

The following strengths of the organizations were identified:
- The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The organizations are unique but also overlap with one another
- A wide range of services are provided for the members (*e.g., recognition programs, professional development, networking opportunities, publications, forms for collaborations, conferences, interest groups, websites*)
- Supports professionalism in the field through standards, certifications, ethics, governing boards, organizational structures
- Scholarly contributions through research, publications, and research centers

The following weaknesses of the organizations were identified:
- Duplication of services among the organizations
- Competition for members among the organizations
- Lack of a unified voice for the field
- Mixed image of the field on the basis of perceptions regarding the names of individual organizations
- Limited resources are stretched too thin among the organizations (*e.g., leadership, membership, expertise, scholarship, political voice*)
- Services to members of the field are not comprehensive
- Current membership of the organizations does not reflect the diversity within society as a whole or postsecondary education *(e.g., older, mostly White, mostly female, mostly two-year institution affiliation)*

Section Four
Threats to the Organizations

The external threats to the organizations are partly an outgrowth of the weaknesses described earlier. There is a concern that the organizations either develop a "conquering" attitude, or "take my ball and going home" attitude. Either would further fragment the field and/or encourage formation of new, additional organizations. The membership base of the organizations are at risk because of an increasing number of retirements and members being pulled in too many directions at work and within their professional organizations to maintain separate memberships in all of them. Within the organizations there is the concern of a lack of continuity of action during which community knowledge is lost and opportunities are missed. On the national level, many grants formerly available to support learning assistance projects have been eliminated or curtailed. At the state level there is a smaller percentage of money budgeted for higher education. On the institutional level, there is frequently an identity crisis as to whether learning support services should be housed in Student or Academic Affairs. Some federal/state laws limit or prohibit developmental education courses. This reflects a type of counterproductive elitism where public four-year colleges lose developmental education or learning assistance program support. There is also confusion about the terminology relating to the services of learning support and developmental education. Certainly, not all of the threats are within the control of the organizations, but they do impact the organizations and members. Under the current structure, the organizations' hands are tied to present a united, powerful front to the threats that face them. Perhaps one of the greatest threats is the fear of change (or fear of the unknown) which is expressed in many ways by members and leaders of the professional organizations.

The following external threats to the organizations were identified:
- Fear of the unknown or of change inhibits potential improvements
- Increased use of part-time or adjunct faculty members may reduce jobs for current organization members who are full-time
- Elitism by public four-year colleges that reduce or eliminate developmental education courses or learning assistance programs
- Actions by state or federal legislation to limit or eliminate offering developmental education courses at public four-year institutions
- Reduced funding of public higher education may result in stagnant or reduced funding for programs at the institutional level
- Misunderstanding of the field by external stakeholders (*e.g., state legislators, state higher education officials*) may result in counterproductive actions by them regarding the field
- Lack of institutional funding and release time for organization members to participate in conferences and professional development activities
- Loss of membership due to retirement of an aging current membership
- New professional organizations may be formed that further fragment the field and compete with the existing organizations

Section Five
Opportunities

The organizations that represent the field will need to make difficult choices to respond to the challenging environment within postsecondary education. There are numerous opportunities for the organizations to pursue to improve service to the field, its members, and the entire education community. Some of these recommendations would require minimal effort through closer coordination of activities with the other organizations. Others would require more effort since they require equal collaborative efforts. The most challenging category of opportunities would require creation of a new professional organization. The recommendations generated through this SWOT report are placed in these three categories.

*1. Increased **coordination** among organizations:*
- Organizations more clearly focus their new member recruitment efforts to reduce competition for the same individuals.
- Develop a common strategy and series of activities to influence policy makers at the state and national level
- Create a master calendar of events among all the organizations at the state and national level to permit more effective planning and reduce avoidable conflicts of time
- Better utilize the American Council for Developmental Education Associations (ACDEA) as a clearinghouse to coordinate activities, certification programs, and services among the member organizations
- Agreement among the organizations to avoid the appearance of overlapping certification programs and ensure that the programs are similar in their approach
- Increase communication among the national and state leaders of the organizations
- Increase reciprocal agreements among the organizations (*e.g., advertisements in publications, exhibit booths*)

*2. Increased **collaboration** among organizations:*
- Merge some organizational functions to increase efficiency and effectiveness (*e.g., publications, conferences, research activities*)
- Offer a unified public relations campaign to influence policy makers and the general public regarding critical issues
- Provide discounted membership rates and publication subscription costs for individuals who are members of other professional organizations
- Hold periodic joint conferences, symposia, and workshops among the organizations
- Pool resources among the organizations to offer professional development activities for members (*e.g., expertise, Internet-based delivery systems*)
- Seek to increase the diversity of membership across all the organizations
- Combine interest groups among the different organizations (*e.g., special interest groups, special professional interest networks*)
- Build stronger relationships among organizations outside of the field in the U.S.
- Build stronger relationships with like-minded organizations outside of the U.S.

- Hire part-time or full-time staff to facilitate increased coordination and collaboration among organizations
- Increase agreement among organizations regarding terminology used to define the field

*3. Vision to **create** a new professional organization:*
Create a new organization with an expanded vision and mission to serve students and educators. This approach addresses many of the current weaknesses and threats and provides the best opportunity for future service. The intent would be to build a new organization, not merely a merger. Rather than just consolidating the current membership spread among the existing organizations, the intent would be to become more inclusive and hence attract many more members to this new organization. Rather than dividing leadership, resources, and scholarship among the organizations, all would be centralized within one. This synergy of resources would be a powerful engine for expanded service to current and future members. It would be more cost efficient to the organization members since they can avoid the need to join multiple organizations and travel to the various national conferences or competing state chapter events. This approach would make available to all the unique talents and resources that have previously been distributed among the organizations. There would be a consistent approach to standards and certifications. Having one voice would increase the clarity of the field's position on critical issues with policymakers. We would join most fields in higher education by having one predominant organization that provides a wide suite of services to members.

This report does not attempt to identify a structure for such a new organization. There are a number of examples within the higher education community (*e.g., American Psychological Association, American Education Research Association*). In these large organizations, they have carefully designed themselves to serve the needs of a diverse membership. For example, these organizations (APA, AERA) have major operating divisions based on the occupational and professional interests of the members. The divisions have considerable autonomy regarding conference program strands, approval of concurrent presentations, election of officers by its division members, publication of professional journals and newsletters, development of services to meet specialized needs, creation of special interest networks, etc. These organizations have found a way to create an environment where individuals do not feel lost, but rather find a comfortable home that meets their specific needs within a larger umbrella structure.

Conclusion

Many opportunities have been presented to coordinate, collaborate, and to create new activities, services, and structures to better meet the needs of current and potential members. Rather than attempting to evaluate the merits of each of these three avenues in this report, the goal is foster an informed conversation about the future. The choices made by the organizations may include a combination of activities among these three categories. The critical next step is for a wider conversation among members of the organizations to take place concerning the future of the profession.