

Adding VALUE:  
*A New National Adult Learner Organization*

*A Report from the Founding Meeting  
at  
the Highlander Center,  
New Market, Tennessee,  
March 1998*

*Prepared April 1998  
by  
Paul Jurmo, Carole Talan, and Leslie Shelton*

*for*

*The Highlander Meeting Planning Committee*  
*Archie Willard (chair), Brenda Bell, Beth Bingman, Pat Blackwell, Ed Castor,  
Dale Christianson, Toni Cordell, Paul Jurmo, Patsy Medina, David Rosen, Leslie Shelton, Meg  
Young, John Zickefoose,*  
*and*  
*Jon Randall and Jane Hugo (meeting facilitators)*

*and*

*The newly-formed board of VALUE*  
*(Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education)*  
*Archie Willard (chair), Pat Blackwell, Linda Brown, Ed Castor, Dale Christianson,  
Toni Cordell, Enrique Ramirez, Annette Sessions, Frank Symonds, Charles Windstead, and John  
Zickefoose*

## Background

In summer of 1997, Iowa-based adult learner Archie Willard convened a dozen adult education learners and practitioners to begin talking about organizing a new national organization for current and former participants in adult basic skills programs in the United States. All members of this group had a common interest in promoting leadership among adult learners.

From that summer through March of 1998, this committee communicated frequently by conference calls and e-mail to plan a three-day meeting at the Highlander Center near Knoxville, Tennessee. Participants at that meeting would put together a plan for a new adult learner organization. Highlander was chosen because of its long history as a training center for leaders in the civil rights, labor, and other movements for social justice.

The committee used the Internet and other communication networks to solicit applications from learners interested in participating, and then carefully chose who could attend. The committee made special efforts to ensure a dynamic mix of types of learners from across the country who had already taken leadership roles within and outside their literacy programs. Because of the limited space available at the conference center and because the committee wanted a diverse mix of participants, some well-qualified potential participants were not able to attend. The committee nonetheless hoped that all interested learners and supporters of literacy would find ways to participate in whatever organization emerged from the meeting.

The committee planned an agenda which would involve the participants in mapping out purposes, membership criteria, a governance structure, communications channels, a financial plan, and other elements of a plan for a new organization for adult learners. Two professional facilitators from the literacy field were chosen to lead the meeting. The nonprofit organization, Learning Partnerships, served as fiscal agent to handle meeting-related funds and provided administrative services to the planning committee.

The committee also raised some funds from two corporations (Time Warner and the Industrial Coatings Group), a professional association (the Learning Disabilities Association of Iowa), three individuals, and a local literacy program (Literacy Volunteers of America - Lake County, Wisconsin) to cover the meeting's costs. Several national organizations provided in-kind help to the committee in the forms of conference calls (National Institute for Literacy) and staff time (Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America). The fifty people who participated were able to cover almost all of their own travel and lodging costs from either their own pockets or from other sources including their literacy programs, state adult education offices, adult education professional associations, or their tutors.

The remainder of this report outlines how the meeting was structured and key

elements of the draft plan which is to guide the organization in its first year. A more detailed version of this report (including details of the recommendations outlined below, as well as other lessons learned during this historic event) will be prepared for interested parties.

The planning committee and meeting participants thank all the many supporters who made these three days possible.

*For more information, contact VALUE board chairperson Archie Willard (30 Parkview Drive, Eagle Grove, Iowa 50533, 515/448-3213, "millard@netins.net" ) or Paul Jurmo (Learning Partnerships, 14 Griffin Street, East Brunswick, NJ 08816-4806, 732-254-2237, "pjjurmo@intac.com.")*

## **How the meeting was structured**

The three days were organized as a participatory discussion around a series of questions. The 41 adult learner participants (from 22 states and the District of Columbia) worked in small groups facilitated by adult education practitioners who had served on the planning committee. (See Appendix.) Day one opened with a welcome from committee chair Archie Willard, and then participants set groundrules (e.g., "listening to what others say," "expressing oneself frankly") which all would follow for the three days.

It was hoped that participants would feel free to actively contribute their ideas and, ultimately, support the organization which emerged. Positive feedback from participants suggests that this strategy worked.

On the evening of the second day, participants considered a dozen possible names for the new organization which were submitted by fellow participants. They selected the following: "VALUE," for "Voice of Adult Literacy United for Education."

## **The plan for year one**

Participants agreed that, in its first year (April 1998 through March 1999), VALUE will be led by an "acting board." (See "Decision-Making Structure," below.) At the end of one year, a new board will be elected.

The "acting board" will be composed of board members and other VALUE members. The board will -- through the work of its committees and input from members -- expand on and otherwise revise this plan during year one.

## **The Organization's Mission**

The mission of VALUE is to expand the role of adult learners as leaders in the effort to promote the success of literacy throughout the nation. VALUE is a resource for adult learners, literacy practitioners, and policy makers as it strives to heighten public awareness, advocate for effective policies and practice, and promote the understanding that each and every one who wants to improve his/her literacy skills can do so.

## **Membership criteria**

The following individuals and organizations can participate in VALUE:

*"Individual learners": Individuals who have struggled with reading and writing and who have participated or are participating in adult basic education (including English for speakers of other languages) programs in the United States. Individual learner members will pay dues and have both a vote and a voice in the organization.*

*"Learner organizations": Organizations which represent and are led by adult learners. Learner organizations will pay dues and will have both a vote and a voice in VALUE.*

*"Individual and organizational supporters": VALUE wants to get support from those who believe in adult learner leadership. There will therefore be a separate category of "individual and organizational supporters" for individuals and organizations which don't qualify as "individual learners" or "learner organizations" but who nonetheless want to support VALUE. These "individual and organizational supporters" will pay dues and have a voice but no vote in VALUE. (This will follow the model of the planning committee which organized the Highlander meeting.)*

It was agreed that the new board and its membership committee will more clearly define elements of this membership structure. Questions to be resolved include: how memberships will be paid for and kept track of, how long a membership will last, how members will be recruited and kept informed, how they will vote and have a voice in decisions, and what benefits members will get for joining.

## **Decision-making structure**

VALUE will be overseen in its first year by an 11-member board comprised of (a) the six learners who served on the meeting planning committee and (b) five new members who were chosen by a vote of learners on the second day of this meeting. This new "acting board" is as follows:

- Pat Blackwell: Indiana
- Linda Brown: Pennsylvania
- Ed Castor: Indiana
- Dale Christianson: Illinois
- Toni Cordell: New York
- Enrique Ramirez: California
- Annette Sessions: Connecticut
- Frank Symonds: Rhode Island
- Charles Windstead: North Carolina
- John Zickefoose: California

This board generally reflects the diversity (of geography, ethnicity/race, and gender) of the population of adult learners in the United States.

The board created several committees which to plan and implement VALUE's activities and responsibilities. Board members will chair or co-chair those committees, and other members can participate on them. Each committee will choose one or more "non-learners" (e.g., adult education professionals, businesspersons) to serve as advisors or mentors on an as-needed basis.

VALUE's day-to-day logistics (e.g., fundraising, bookkeeping, report-writing, etc.) will be managed by a part-time adult education professional who understands and supports the new organization's mission and needs.

In its first year, this structure will be kept simple, to enable VALUE to get off the ground. In future years, this structure might be expanded to regional or state levels and focus on states and communities where the need for adult education is greatest.

Those who have agreed to serve on the board and committees committed themselves to active involvement, especially in the first year when momentum is vital. The board will be a team in which all will play important roles and unnecessary hierarchies will be minimized.

### **Communication channels**

Board members and committees will communicate by conference call and e-mail as much as possible, as well as by fax, mail, and occasional meetings.

The board and members will communicate with each other by phone tree, e-mail (and possibly a listserv and/or web page), fax, newsletter (and/or a 1-2 page "brief" from the board), and teleconferences. A directory of members will be made available to facilitate communication.

The board will also communicate with the literacy field and general public through

participation in organizations like the National Coalition for Literacy and through press releases, videos, a speakers' bureau, and a Web site.

## **Financial management**

In its first year, VALUE will use the nonprofit organization, Learning Partnerships, as its fiscal agent. This will allow the new organization to solicit charitable donations, have a bank account, and otherwise handle funds in an accountable and legal way. When it gets established, VALUE will likely set up its own nonprofit organization and bank account.

The board (through its fundraising committee) will make decisions related to fundraising and other fiscal matters. To ensure efficient and coordinated financial management, the fundraising committee can authorize each committee to raise and manage its own funds, while keeping the fundraising fully informed of any financial activities. The board will consider adapting an existing proposal which the meeting planning committee has already developed, as a possible fundraising strategy for VALUE.

## **Priority activities for year one**

In the first year (April 1998 through March 1999), the board and its committees will oversee the five priority activities shown below. These activities are both "internal" in nature (to build VALUE's membership and resources) and "external" in nature (to carry out the organization's mission in the literacy community). The five committees will revise and expand on the recommendations for their respective areas of responsibility which were developed at this meeting.

*By-Laws Committee: Will prepare a set of formal by-laws to guide VALUE.*

*Membership Committee: Will develop and implement a plan for recruiting members, registering them, collecting and managing dues, etc.*

*Communications Committee: Will establish efficient communications channels for the board, its committees, membership, and general public.*

*National Agenda/Program Committee: Will develop and implement a plan for advocacy and a national conference.*

*Fundraising Committee: Will develop and implement a plan for raising and managing funds.*

Each committee met on the last day of the meeting to begin mapping out more-specific objectives, timelines, responsibilities, and ways to monitor committee progress.

# APPENDIX

## Meeting Participants and Resource Persons

### Learner Participants

Michael Amstein (Vermont)	Gloria Ashford (California)
Norman Bates (Michigan)	Pat Blackwell (Indiana)
Linda Brown (Pennsylvania)	Morris Brown (Tennessee)
Ed Castor (Indiana)	John Corcoran (California)
Toni Cordell (New York)	Virginia Davis (West Virginia)
Vivian Deford (Wisconsin)	Gerald Eitzen (Iowa)
Diana Estill (Texas)	Marty Finsterbusch (Pennsylvania)
Catherine Gilane (Wisconsin)	Anna Hart (Florida)
Donna Jones (California)	Matilda King (Massachusetts)
Allan Paul Laroche (Vermont)	Geraldine Lewis (Washington, DC)
Bobby McGirt, Sr. (North Carolina)	Carol Majewski (Massachusetts)
Andrea Martinez (Colorado)	Laura Mooney (West Virginia)
Annabelle Palacios (California)	Rose Payne (Oklahoma)
James Poole (Illinois)	Enrique Ramirez (California)
Elaine Randall (Washington, DC)	Elizabeth Saunders (Ohio)
Annette Sessions (Connecticut)	Dale Sherman (Ohio)
Annie Sills (Illinois)	Harrison Sylvester (Maine)
Frank Symonds (Rhode Island)	Emma Torrez (California)
William Walker (Maryland)	Archie Willard (Iowa)
Charles Windstead (North Carolina)	Glenn Young (Washington, DC)
John Zickefoose (California)	

### Resource Persons

Brenda Bell (Center for Literacy Studies, University of Tennessee)  
Beth Bingman (Center for Literacy Studies, University of Tennessee)  
Jane Hugo (Laubach Literacy Action)  
Paul Jurmo (Learning Partnerships)  
Jon Randall (Literacy Volunteers of America)  
David Rosen (Boston Adult Literacy Resource Institute)  
Leslie Shelton (South San Francisco Public Library)  
Carole Talan (California State Literacy Resource Center)  
Meg Young (Oregon Literacy)