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January 5, 2005

**Writers Brigade to Disseminate AAC-RERC Activities***by Johana Schwartz, Writers Brigade Manager*

The Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Communication Enhancement (AAC-RERC) has launched an innovative new program called the Writers Brigade (WB) as part of its second funding cycle. The AAC-RERC WB operates under the mission of enhancing employability for writers who depend on augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), by hiring them to disseminate current information about research and development activities in the field. Articles written by the participants are intended for publication in a variety of media, reaching a broad audience. The WB will employ four to six writers at a time, over the course of the next four and a half years. The WB participants inaugurating the program were Joe Hemphill, Tracy Rackensperger, Jan Staehley and Tom Younkerman, with Bill Geluso joining the roster midway through the first year.



Michael B. Williams and Sarah Blackstone of Augmentative Communication, Inc., the AAC-RERC publishing branch, conceived of the WB in 2003, in response to the findings of their colleagues, Drs. David McNaughton and Diane Bryen who reported that people with complex communication needs often are unemployed or underemployed. Johana Schwartz is working to reverse these pessimistic statistics by offering work experiences to individuals who rely on AAC and by teaching them the skills necessary to become technical writers.

The AAC-RERC Writers' Brigade brings results by recognizing the talents of individuals with complex communication needs and then coaching the participants to apply these talents to meet the demands of the business world. Participants tap into their potential through a rigorous, yet completely accessible, coaching experience that acknowledges the challenges faced by people who use assistive technology. All business is conducted via the Internet using the WB list serv and email. The virtual nature of the program enables participants to receive much more individualized attention and customized feedback than they would in other programs. Each participant develops a plan to meet his or her own goals incorporating the fundamental skills of technical writing and professionalism.

Here is a glimpse of what has recently gone on in the WB:

I sent a message to the listserv announcing the next assignment. Each participant was to write an article covering the 15 new projects undertaken by the AAC-RERC. (Please follow this link to see an example of one of these articles

<http://www.connsensebulletin.com/joeaac.html>.) I asked the writers to select a target publication by choosing from a list that ranged from consumer newsletters to professional journals. First, with their audience in mind, they had to consider how they would tailor their writing to address the expectations of their readers. Next I asked them to outline the article and to pose questions if they needed to clarify the meaning. I had the participants contemplate questions such as "What do I want to say?", "To whom do I want to say it?", and "How?" The question "How?" yielded their first drafts. After 3 or 4 drafts and discussion with me, the writers have a polished article with their name in the by-line. I emphasize the need to write multiple drafts to help the participants master the art of revision. As professional writers they can expect to rework, reject, and revise their own material. The comments I offer on each draft are framed as explanations, with the goal of guiding the participants to assume responsibility for revising their own work.

After just a few months, participants have responded enthusiastically to their experience in the Writers Brigade. One writer comments: "I think I am going to like the Brigade. Several people have told me there is a great demand for technical writers. However, I can't find these jobs, or any good professional level jobs, for that matter!" Now, this individual has a position in the Writers' Brigade and has been published. The participant's byline has expanded widely, encompassing ConnSENSE, ASHA Advance, and Speak Up.

The participants in the WB have achieved a very high success rate in publishing their writing. Nearly all participants have seen their names in print this year, giving publicity for themselves as well as several of the AAC-RERC projects in progress. Participants have written articles covering specialized vocabulary, technology and policy watch, literacy support, and telework. Also in the works are articles addressing residual speech, webcrawling, and ACETS online.

The AAC-RERC Writers Brigade is demonstrating tremendous potential to reshape employment options and practices for people who use AAC technologies. Through their work, participants expand their employment and social networks by making contact with AAC researchers and potential employers. Simultaneously, by writing articles that disseminate AAC research results, the philosophy of "Nothing about us, without us," is actualized by involving the participants in the ongoing research and development of the field.

Over the next 5 years the AAC-RERC WB will coach several groups of participants. The prospects for a new cohort are in development. The Writers Brigade welcomes nominations from the AAC-RERC staff. As the AAC-RERC says, "Spread the word" about the WB. For additional information, please contact us. The AAC-RERC website is [www.aac-rerc.com](http://www.aac-rerc.com). Our website is [www.augcominc.com](http://www.augcominc.com). On this site you will find our postal address, phone number, and fax number.

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