

# State Networks Meeting Leads to New Directions

BY LISA WILLIAMS

Over the next few years, the National Writing Project plans to expand and strengthen existing state networks and develop new ones through increased attention and funding. At the recent NWP State Networks meeting in Savannah, Georgia, writing project leaders from 21 states gathered to learn more about how NWP's focus on state networks can help the sites of their states.

Sherry Swain, as national coordinator for state networks, helped participants visualize the new NWP opportunities available to state networks as three doors through which state leaders can pass. The first door leads to NWP's traditional minigrants for special projects of state networks. The second, and most significant passage, directs state leaders to major new funding available in fall 2002. The third door provides for development of leadership in state networks.

The two-day meeting started with a discussion of the structures and functions of state networks, led by Swain and the other members of the NWP State Networks Leadership Team: Linda Hansen, Indiana; Dolores Johnson, West Virginia; Jayne Marlink, California; Charles Moran, Massachusetts; Mary Ann Smith, California; and Lisa Williams, Alabama. Leadership team members agreed that while the structures and functions of such networks vary, a common feature of successful networks is the emphasis on building a sense of community and shared purpose among the state's sites. When this understanding is achieved, a state leadership team is likely to emerge.

And what can a successful state network do? The state network can provide opportunities for one site to support another. It can share information about state issues and programs, bring the sites together to work for funding, and plan ways to establish a state presence and

to work on common projects as needs emerge. Panelists made the point that the work of the state network is the shared state project. Among the most common of these projects are publications, conferences, new-site development, partnerships, research, database development, mentoring, and response to state initiatives.

Over the course of the meeting, a team from Inverness Research Associates led by Mark St. John joined the state network representatives. The team provided data portraits of six state networks—California, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, and Virginia—in various stages of development. With assistance from Inverness consultants Kathleen Dickey and Judy Hirabayashi, St. John looked at key data from these sites, such as their age, the length of service of their leadership, and the schools and students they serve. Given this information, it was then possible to categorize sites as being at different stages of development:

*See State Networks, page 19*

# State Networks

*continued from page 15*

- the “state contact” stage, in which there is no network, just the name of someone for NWP to contact
- the “developing state network” stage, in which sites are working together on some common goals
- the “developed state organization” stage, in which the network plays a major role in the work of sites of the state.

Participants next charted activities typical of networks at these stages and then attempted to place their own state’s network along the continuum. The Inverness presentation provided state leaders with insights into the power of joining forces. Swain also noted that the Inverness information supports NWP’s conviction that state networks are vitally important. The state networks, said Swain, are a natural resource for achieving NWP’s goals to increase the number of sites, strengthen existing sites, link with organizations that work with youth, provide scholarship and service to the field, and increase visibility.

The meeting concluded with an invitation to the next NWP State Networks meeting, which is to be held in Atlanta at the NWP Annual Meeting in November. The meeting—a half-day workshop on Saturday—will be open to all states interested in forming or enhancing a state network. For additional information on state networks, funding applications, or the next meeting, contact Sherry Swain at 662/325-7777 or [sswain@colled.msstate.edu](mailto:sswain@colled.msstate.edu)

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