

## Presidential Address 2013—Race to Catch the Future

*James R. Thompson, President, 2013–2014*

Bob Bruininks, a former president of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), was my dissertation advisor. He had a real gift of recalling thoughtful quotations, and then eloquently explaining how these words of wisdom were applicable to our work and lives. He once told me that one of his favorite quotations was: “We must race to catch the future.” The context of this particular conversation was that future leaders in our interdisciplinary field of intellectual disability and related developmental disabilities (ID/DD) were not going to be those who were content with resting on past laurels or conducting their work as if the context were the same today as it was when they entered the field. Rather, the future belonged to those who were willing to push the field forward with new solutions that were aligned with changing times.

Although I haven’t been able to discover who authored the phrase “We must race to catch the future,” I would be proud to have thought it up. To catch the future is to own the future, to make it our own. We must race to catch the future because everything is always changing. Today’s context is different from yesterday’s, and tomorrow’s will be different from today’s. Change is the only constant in our lives and our careers. Those who don’t adjust to changing times will eventually find themselves in a place of irrelevancy. This goes for individuals as well as organizations, including you, the AAIDD, and me.

### Change and Resisting Change

Why is it that people stand still when it is evident that the context has changed and new approaches and new ideas are needed? Why would people choose to face new challenges and changing times with old solutions that may not have worked well for years? Actually, it isn’t difficult to do the same old thing over and over again, and I am sure there are many reasons for doing so. In my experience, two of the more pervasive reasons are that (1) people cling to established activities because it is unpleasant to confront conflicting information

that change is needed and (2) although people may see the need to change, they don’t get around to taking action because they allow the *immediate* to consistently displace the *important*.

Leon Festinger’s (1957) cognitive-dissonance theory has been a pillar of social psychology since the 1950s. A fundamental premise underlying this theory is that people want to believe that activities in which they have vested time and energy provide the best solution to the challenges they face. It is easy to deliberately or subconsciously ignore indicators that new approaches are needed, because acknowledging new realities results in cognitive dissonance which can only be resolved by confronting the struggle that change requires. People want to stick with familiar approaches because adopting new approaches is confusing and uncertain. In contrast, not changing is relatively painless (at least in the short run). When given a choice between “the path of least resistance” and the “road less traveled,” many prefer the easy path even when there is evidence that it is leading them in the wrong direction. Commencing with the hard work inherent to adapting to new realities can be daunting.

Another reason people resist change is that the inertia of everyday work makes it easy for attention to immediate problems to direct attention away from efforts that are essential for systematic, positive change. There are many people in our field who find themselves in a constant state of being overwhelmed or just one tick away from it. Every day, something new pops up that requires unanticipated and immediate attention, time, and energy. I recently asked an administrator in an organization providing adult services what she did in her job, and she stated, “I put out fires all day long.” Although she was being amusingly metaphorical, she seemed proud of the notion that her work life was defined by crisis management. After all, if fires are breaking out all over the place, then a firefighter is an essential person to have around. However, people who get caught in an endless stream of reacting to this, that, and the other thing

allow immediate problems to displace the time and attention required for long-term progress.

Positive change to catch the future happens through taking a longer view than the crisis du jour. Long-range envisioning and planning, looking outward for new ideas or lessons that others have learned, thoughtful implementation of substantive changes, and deliberate monitoring of progress—these are the activities that are critical to catching the future. These activities are essential to determining what needs to be maintained and nurtured, what needs to be modified, and what needs to be discarded.

Although it is surprisingly easy to keep doing the same old thing, there is a high price to be paid for standing pat in the face of evidence that changes are needed. Those who choose to perpetuate the status quo are at great risk of losing their ability to consider alternative approaches. They delude themselves into believing they have something worth protecting when they invest precious time and energy into stale approaches that may have been appropriate at one time and in one context but are no longer viable. They find themselves defending the indefensible, such as archaic approaches to educational, residential, or vocational services; professional-preparation programs that are far removed from professional practice; public policies that are not responsive to people's needs; or research agendas that break no new ground. When the status quo is challenged, there is no warmth to be found among those who cling to it. Perpetuators of the status quo ask, "How did we do it the time before?" Those who catch the future also want to know how we did it the time before, but they don't stop there. They ask, "How can we do it better this time?" and "How can we do an even better job tomorrow?" And because they ask these questions, they allow room for imagination and cultivate opportunities to break new ground.

### **Changing Values for Changing Times**

There is a difference between stating that the future will be different from today and stating that I know what future will bring. Predicting the future is an uncertain undertaking at best. I've learned to be especially wary of prognostications by prophets of doom. Although doomsday predictions are good attention grabbers, they can only be right once. The doomsayers have not been right as of yet.

Certainly, the notion of the sequestration becoming the new normal, tight state budgets, and a host of cultural and political trends are

disconcerting. But in my view, the field of ID/DD is not headed to a catastrophic ending any time soon. There are too many people with developmental disabilities and too many people that love them for our voices to be ignored. Also, I have faith in my fellow citizens—both citizens of the United States and citizens of the world—that there will continue to be an understanding that children and adults with ID/DD need additional supports to participate in and contribute to society and that society has a responsibility to address these support needs. Organized, publicly funded efforts to support people with disabilities are not going to vanish overnight.

Although I don't want to dismiss concerns about heading into even leaner times, I am confident that the core values that drive our field will empower us to do the best we can with what we have, and opportunities for progress will continue. We will face future times—no matter what they are—by checking our actions against the values that serve as fundamental guiding principles. However, although values provide an anchor to weather the storm as the winds of change blow, we must understand that values change over time. Sometimes values change because they were flat-out misguided, but more often values evolve due to a more complete or a more nuanced understanding.

For example, safety and happiness were the prevailing values underlying institutional services for people with intellectual disability up until approximately 50 years ago. Edward Johnstone, an AAIDD president who served two terms (1903–1904 and 1927–1928) was the superintendent of Vineland Training School for almost 50 years. His guiding motto for his institution was "Happiness first and all else follows" (Smith & Wehmeyer, 2012). Joseph Byers, the executive secretary of the National Committee on the Provision for the Feebleminded, promoted the farm colony as a desirable service alternative:

Colony life, by its simplicity and naturalness, conduces to the happiness of the inmates. It gives to them care suited to their needs, and employment suited to their ability. Colonies for females are equally possible, if placed under competent management. Their location, however, should be most carefully selected to afford the inmates the greatest measure of protection. (1917, p. 12)

I don't know of anyone who has ever been opposed to happiness and safety. But by the time the AAIDD reached the 1970s, there was a chorus of voices expressing the viewpoint that overemphasizing



1913 conference's cloud provides evidence that people were concerned with *appropriations*.

It is interesting to contrast the 1913 annual conference's text with text from Robert Perske's transformative "Dignity of Risk" article (1972), published by this association approximately 60 years later. In Perske's word cloud (see Figure 1), *mentally retarded* was used frequently, which is not surprising given that this was the name of the condition at the time. Person-first language had not been introduced when Perske wrote his article, so he certainly needs to be cut some slack in terms of his use of language. However, reading this article as well as other papers written by my heroes—the most influential and progressive leaders of 40 to 50 years ago—it was impossible not to be struck by how far the field has come in terms of understanding the power of words and the importance of respectful language when communicating about people with disabilities.

It is noteworthy that *human* and *persons* are also high-frequency words in Perske's manuscript. Despite Perske's not writing in person-first language, the idea that a disability was secondary to a person's humanity was clearly a major premise of his manuscript. This concept particularly comes through in his use of the word *normal*. Perske stresses the importance of *normal experiences* and *normal settings* that all people in society value. This emphasis was in accordance with the *principle of normalization* that had gained widespread acceptance in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Normalization was undoubtedly the most important sociopolitical concept in the ID/DD field of the past 50 years, due to its influence on the deinstitutionalization movement and public policy (see Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2013). The words *risk*, *dignity*, and *relationships* appear frequently in Perske's article, and it is noteworthy that he regularly mentions places outside of U.S. borders. Perske believed that we in the United States could learn a thing or two from exchanging ideas with others outside of our country, and this most certainly is the case today as well.

Examine Figure 1. It is clear that the 1913 conference's words were different than Perske's words. Just as life in the community is different from life in an institution, language relevant to a field of ID/DD based on institutional services was considerably different from language relevant to a field focused on normalization, deinstitutionalization, and promotion of community living. But Perske wrote his article more than four decades ago.

Have we made any progress since 1972? What values underlie our professional field today? What is the philosophy of our age? Would entering text into Tagzdo from the recent AAIDD presidential addresses provide a glimpse into today's zeitgeist? Since there was only way to find out, I copied and pasted text from every presidential address published on the AAIDD's website since 2006. The word cloud that emerged is shown in Figure 1.

The biggest words in the picture are *people* (notice that *person* is right next to it), *community*, *lives*, *intellectual*, and *disabilities* (Tagzdo automatically combines certain words, and this was the case with *disability* and *disabilities*). These five words provide a good start toward understanding the philosophy of our age. *People with intellectual disability* should live their *lives* as valued members of *communities*.

*Intellectual disability* is the new terminology for the condition (Schalock et al., 2010). If we, as a professional association and as individuals, remain vigilant in using respectful language and educating the public, then there is every reason to believe that *intellectual disability* will not face the same fate as the archaic terms that have come before (and acquired so much negative baggage that they became counterproductive for communication purposes). I don't buy the argument that *intellectual disability* will have a shelf life of 25 years before it is considered to be a pejorative term on par with *mental retardation*. We need to catch the future by remaining watchful about our own language and how others, especially the media, use disability-related language to communicate. We will have failed if we allow *intellectual disability* to experience the same fate as archaic terms that are now considered offensive.

Also prominent in the word cloud from recent presidential addresses are *services* and *supports*. As far as I am concerned, it worked out quite well that these two words are about the same size and right next to each other in the picture. The function of today's disability services is not to provide programs for groups of people with disabilities but rather to facilitate the provision of personalized supports. The good people who work for provider organizations deserve respect, encouragement, and reasonable wages and compensation. If we want high-quality, professional work from the disability-service-provider workforce, they must be treated as people whose expertise and labor are of value. Sadly, the direct-support professional workforce continues to be poorly

paid, and retaining good employees is a major problem (American Network of Community Options and Resources, 2010).

People and organizations that provide specific services to the larger community should provide services and supports to people with ID/DD. That is, people with ID/DD need medical services, financial services, transportation services, and all of the other types of services that everyone needs in an interdependent society. However, there are many places where community services must develop more capacity to accommodate greater diversity. Increasing the competence of public services to meet the needs of people with ID/DD is one of the great challenges of our age.

The *word cloud* emerging from recent presidential addresses includes many smaller words that provide additional glimpses into today's zeitgeist: *inclusive, quality, opportunities, family, self-determination*, and yes, the *institutions* are still with us. Reading between the lines, here is my attempt at a succinct synopsis of today's zeitgeist:

1. Intellectual disability is best understood in terms of the fit between personal competency and the demands of community environments. Understanding people this way focuses professional efforts on modifying the context by either changing the environment, as is accomplished through universal design, or introducing personalized supports. One important type of support is teaching new skills.
2. Although people with intellectual disability have support needs that are different from those of the general population, they have the same basic wants and desires as everyone else. They certainly want to be safe and happy, but they also want their rights acknowledged and respected. They want a home to live in—and a home is not simply a physical structure that provides shelter from the elements. They want meaningful work and other opportunities to make contributions to the world. They want all kinds of relationships with people with and without disabilities, because people without relationships are lonely. They want family relationships, close friends, romantic friends, casual friends, and so on. They want meaningful ways to spend their time, and that includes hobbies in which to immerse themselves as well as opportunities for lifelong learning. They want choices so that their lives are unique, and they do not want a

series of “canned programs” targeted only to people with disabilities.

3. Families of children with intellectual disability want their children to be offered a meaningful education that is taken just as seriously as the education that is offered to all other children. An essential component of a meaningful education is an opportunity to be educated alongside general-education peers. Educators who know how to expand the capacity of general-education classrooms to meet the needs of a diverse student population are needed.
4. Professionals are useful to the extent that they contribute to empowering people with intellectual disability to experience “enviable lives” (as Joanna Pierson and Ann Tunbull might say). To be useful, professionals must strive to:
  - a. Understand each person holistically, with particular sensitivity to the fact that all people have relative strengths to go along with relative limitations.
  - b. Focus professional efforts on arranging personalized supports that bridge the gap between any limitations in personal competency and the demands of settings and activities.
  - c. Recognize that empowering people with disabilities to live full lives in their communities not only enhances the quality of life of people with disabilities but also enables the general population to experience the contributions and the richness that people with disabilities provide to their communities.

In his 1996 presidential address to this association, Bill Kiernan likened our work as a field to a journey with a family in a car, and taking a cue from the kids in the backseat he asked us, “Are we there yet?” His conclusion was, “We have made substantial progress, but we have a ways to go before we can declare victory for all” (p. 394). My conclusion 17 years later is that we have traveled farther down the road, but we still have not arrived. Although “Are we there yet?” is an excellent question to ask ourselves on a regular basis, I doubt we will ever reach the end of the journey. There will always be room for improvement. As we successfully climb each hill, we will spot new frontiers on the horizon. What is important is to assess whether we are moving forward, and to what extent we are progressing with a sense of urgency. Are we racing to catch the future?

## **AAIDD's Role: Furthering Knowledge, Encouraging Mentoring, Promoting Engagement**

Space does not allow me the luxury describing all of the exciting things the AAIDD is doing under its own roof or in conjunction with its partners, let alone touching on all of the frontiers on the horizon. Therefore, I am limiting myself to three areas that are near and dear to my heart in regard to how the AAIDD can contribute to the race to catch the future. Although I believe that our association has many important contributions to make to the field of ID/DD, three of its most important roles are to further knowledge, encourage mentoring, and promote engagement.

### **Furthering Knowledge**

As we take our next steps as a field, there will be fewer wrong turns if we fully embrace the value of knowledge claims that are based on scientific research and recognize that knowledge claims based on intuition, tradition, and personal knowledge do not carry the same authority. The recent cuts in federal funds that support research in disability-related fields should concern us all (see, e.g., Diament, 2013). Not all knowledge claims are created equal, and the loudness and passion with which a knowledge claim is expressed have no relation to its trustworthiness.

It is useful to periodically revisit what scientific research is and what it is not. Scientific research findings are generated through systematic empiricism. Systematic empiricism requires that observations be made and recorded according to a fixed plan or a structured system to generate data. Then there is a set of procedures to analyze data in order to make sense of the observations. Systematic empiricism includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The choice of research methods is dependent on the research questions that are asked.

Scientific knowledge claims are based on data collection and analysis procedures that can be replicated. Also, the quality of the research is verified through peer review. Peer review requires scrutiny of the research by experts who have worked in the same research area. Of course, just because a knowledge claim passes peer review and gets published does not mean it is correct. However, the fact that there is such a process in place enables us to have far more confidence in

whatever knowledge claim emerges than if we simply relied on the loudest or most popular opinion, or what has generated the most hits through an Internet search engine because it was said by a celebrity.

The AAIDD has been a leader in disseminating scientific research that is focused on people with ID/DD for many years, and it has long provided a home for researchers to find encouragement and support. This must continue. Research findings can be transforming, and a field that embraces knowledge that is generated through valid research can reach new heights.

It had been a long time since I had given thought to Walter Fernald's aftercare study (1919) when I heard Charlie Lakin (2012) tell Fernald's story at the IASSID conference in Halifax last summer. In addition to being the AAIDD president 121 years ago, Fernald was a rabid eugenicist who wrote in our association's journal that people with ID "are a parasitic, predatory class. ... They cause unutterable sorrow at home and are a menace and a danger to a community" (1912, p. 88).

To gather evidence that would prove the folly of discharging people from institutions, Fernald conducted a massive follow-up study of former inmates of the Waverly institution, some of whom had been discharged for 25 years. Follow-up research was no easy feat in the early 1900s, and it had to be painstaking to track people down after so many years. But Dr. Fernald believed in the importance of letting data speak. He was confident that data would prove his case, stating, "We honestly believed that nearly all of these people should remain in the institution indefinitely" (1919, p. 26).

What cognitive dissonance Fernald must have felt when he first encountered the results. Many of the men held jobs and relatively few of them had been in any trouble with the law. And the women, especially those "who had friends capable of understanding them and of properly protecting them" (p. 27) were not exploited and did not cause societal problems. In fact, many women were happily married and had successful family lives. Fernald was surprised to learn that "the social worker saw nearly all of the children and was not sure any of them were defective" (p. 26). Of course, there were those who were struggling in one area of life or another. But as a group, as Fernald's research showed, the former inmates weren't a menace to society but were contributors to society.

Fernald was a proud medical doctor who had been a superintendent of an institution for decades. His systematic research showed that his life's work had been misguided. To his credit, Fernald changed. He reversed his position on eugenics and became an advocate for providing services in communities, including funding for public education for children with intellectual disability (Scheerenberger, 1983).

Although it is highly unlikely any single research study will lead to such a dramatic transformation as occurred with Dr. Fernald, today's professionals need to be every bit as open to research findings that challenge prevailing assumptions. Moreover, research findings should lead to action by informing professional practice as well as public policy. Occasionally, I will be asked, "Are we really learning anything new?" and, in light of today's tight budgets and public-policy priorities, "Does it continue to make sense to use public funds to support research?" My answers are, "Yes, we are learning new things all of time" and "Yes, it is essential that researchers have access to sufficient funding to continue to expand the knowledge base."

There are far too many valuable research findings that have emerged in recent years for me to begin to mention. However, here are two brief examples to illustrate the types of knowledge claims to which people should pay attention. First, Robert Siegler et al. (2012) found that elementary students' knowledge of fractions and long division was strongly associated with algebra and overall mathematics achievement in high school. Therefore, teachers should not be too quick to pull out that calculator and throw in the towel on teaching an elementary-school-age child mathematical operations. Although these findings are only correlational, educators must be cautious about closing the door too early on what could be a very important skill set relative to future achievement. Second, Lakin et al. (2008) presented data showing that more adults with intellectual disability prefer collaborative decision making to deciding alone. Actually, I think most people with and without disabilities have this same preference. However, this research finding should serve to heighten awareness of the complexities of promoting self-determination and underscore the importance of each person's having access to a circle of trusted allies for support when making decisions and choices.

Because the field of ID/DD is an applied field, scientific knowledge claims are only useful insofar

as the knowledge is applied in ways that improve professional practice and enhance the lives of people with disabilities. Fortunately, disseminating research has been, and will continue to be, a prominent role for the AAIDD. Through our two excellent print journals, the *American Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* and *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, the association has established itself as a leader in disseminating scientifically valid research findings. The association's newest journal, *Inclusion*, is an electronic journal and is intended to more explicitly bridge the gap between research and practice. Of special note are the instructions to authors: "Articles must be written to be accessible to an array of audiences" (AAIDD, 2013, "Aims and Scope" section, para. 1). *Inclusion* is peer reviewed, and readers can be confident it will carry on the tradition of excellent scholarship that has characterized the AAIDD's publications.

In addition to its journals, during the past year the AAIDD has offered 22 webinars at no cost, cosponsored five national conferences, collaborated with the Hospice Foundation of America to develop an educational module on hospice care for people with intellectual disability, and launched seven new online courses. The AAIDD has six new books that will be coming to print before the end of the year. And last but not least, the research division is up and running to provide a home for those who have research as part of their professional life and identity. If the AAIDD is to catch the future, it must remain at the forefront of disseminating trustworthy knowledge and nurturing the research community.

### Encouraging Mentoring

In his presidential address 15 years ago, Bob Schalock (1998) reported on findings from a series of interviews with people whom he considered to be visionaries for positive change. These individuals were a diverse group in terms of types of jobs, geography, and so forth. Among his conclusions were that "people join a crusade or movement and commit their time and resources to it because they find meaning, value, and a sense of accomplishment" (p. 477).

Bob was correct. People commit to activities they find to be personally meaningful, offer tangible value, and provide a sense of accomplishing something at the end of the day. However, I have

noticed this is not what seems to be sustaining Bob these days. Rather, mentoring others so that they can find meaning, find value, and experience a sense of accomplishment is what seems to be sustaining Bob. And I find myself slowing becoming more like Bob as my professional life moves forward. At a certain point in a successful career, contributing in a small or large way to another's growth and seeing that person find meaning, attain value, and accomplish great things becomes more gratifying than additional individual accolades. Those who have had the experience of contributing to another's success have had the opportunity to experience the joy that comes with mentoring.

Val Bradley (2006) pointed out in her presidential address 7 years ago that we don't need to look far to find a mentor or mentee. "Sustainability requires an unbroken chain of concern and competence. That will mean identifying people in our own organizations, encouraging them, and giving them the opportunity to develop their own reputations" (p. 386). Also in her presidential address, Val mentioned that her first mentor was Arthur Bolton. Although I have never met Mr. Bolton, I know him. I know him because I have come to know Val. Because he was a mentor to her, there will always be a part of him in her. Mentors catch the future because their influence lives on in those they have mentored.

Something that often gets lost in discussions on mentorship is that mentoring is not just a relationship between the young and the old, the new and the established. At all stages of our careers we need mentors and are mentors. The AAIDD must strive to be an organization where its members extend themselves to mentor as well as to seek out mentorship. The Student and Early Career Professional Guide program is an excellent, organized way to connect mentors and mentees. However, members should not overlook less formal opportunities to mentor and to be mentored through the divisions, special-interest groups (SIGs), chapters, and regions.

The dictionary's definition of a mentor is "a trusted counselor or guide" ("Mentor," n.d.). In his book on mentoring called *Guiding Lights*, Eric Liu (2006) claimed that the opposite of a mentor is a tormentor. However, I'm going to update this term for the Harry Potter generation and suggest that the opposite of a mentor is a Dementor. In the Harry Potter stories, Dementors are creatures of the magical world that seek to suck the life energy

and soul out of others. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, one of Harry Potter's mentors (Professor Remus Lupin) warns him, "Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you" (Rowling, 2001, p. 83).

Sadly, that description of a fictional creature seems to only be a slight exaggeration of certain people I have known who should not be in the field of ID/DD. Unfortunately, almost everyone has had experiences with malcontents who sneer at the efforts of those who strive to make things better, discourage creative thinking, and are so unhappy with their lives that they seemingly do not feel in a state of equilibrium unless they make everyone around them just as unhappy. The AAIDD must not only offer opportunities to mentor and be mentored but must empower its members to counteract the negativity of Dementors who enter their space.

### Promoting Engagement

I have the privilege of working in a wonderful community of faculty colleagues and students at Illinois State University (ISU) who encourage one another. They inspire me to continually grow in my professional life and as a human being. However, as much as I appreciate my ISU community, I also treasure the opportunity to work and learn from colleagues from different universities, from outside university settings, from different disciplines, and from different countries. The diversity of professional interests, professional roles, and geographic representation is what makes the AAIDD an especially rich community for those looking for an additional professional home outside of their workplace. The AAIDD offers opportunities to engage with a broader agenda and access a more expansive perspective than any one local workplace or single discipline can provide.

Professionals in the field of ID/DD need regular opportunities for renewal. It is a very rare person who can keep their mind and spirit in a fixed state of positivity without support from others. Professionals need opportunities to be reminded that their work is connected to a cause and mission that is greater than any one job or one workplace. Networking with other professionals from throughout North America and around the globe, contributing to organized efforts that influence the lives of people with disabilities both nationally and internationally, and learning about current trends and

the latest research findings are the types of experiences that can be gained through the AAIDD. Moreover, they are the types of experiences that over time sustain professionals who have chosen to work in a field that is intellectually and emotionally demanding.

Make no mistake about it: Today's field of ID/DD is a global field. Those who join the International SIG have opportunities to meet professionals that work in universities, service-provider organizations, and governmental agencies across the globe. Also, the association organizes delegations to countries outside of North America each year. Last year it was Brazil, the year before it was Cuba, this year it is Norway. The AAIDD is firmly committed to partnering with international organizations as well as associations from other countries. Of course, the *Definition, Classification, and Systems of Supports Manual* (Schalock et al., 2010) and *Supports Intensity Scale* (Thompson et al., 2004) are two of our association's products that have generated considerable international interest in recent years. There are multiple opportunities for AAIDD members to become globally engaged in the ID/DD field.

Although the AAIDD has much to offer its members, it will always only be as good as the people who choose to be invested in it. I strongly encourage those who are inclined to be passive members to consider becoming active members. One myth I often hear is that volunteering for a task force, assuming a leadership position, or contributing in some way to the association requires a person to put forth an untenable amount of time. The "time sucker" myth needs to be put to bed. When I have asked active members about their experiences, I have yet to encounter anyone who perceived his or her obligations to the AAIDD as being onerous in regard to time and energy. There are plenty of small ways to become involved that truly do not require much time at all. The reality is that people find their experiences with the AAIDD to be positive and fun.

Everyone is welcome to become involved in the AAIDD's work and mission. For those who are not sure how to get involved, I suggest e-mailing Maggie Nygren at [mnygren@aaidd.org](mailto:mnygren@aaidd.org) and asking her if there is a task force or some other way to participate. She'll write back with a suggestion. The current AAIDD leadership (e.g., board members, division presidents, regional officers) is a warm and welcoming group, and working with the AAIDD's

professional staff is a joy. There is a sincere desire to encourage a steady flow of new members to become active in the association and assume leadership roles. Honestly, it is a great time for people to become involved.

I especially encourage people to look for AAIDD opportunities that enable them to explore any "dormant selves" that may be difficult to express in their everyday job. People with talents as conference organizers should become involved in the planning committees for either the annual conference or their state conference. People who enjoy teaching should use the AAIDD as a venue to share good ideas. Beginning researchers need to connect with experienced researchers and find ways to collaborate. To long-term members and to those who are currently active in the association, I issue this challenge: Let's all make a special effort in the coming year to reach out to colleagues from underrepresented groups, particularly people of color. Our society is more diverse than ever, and the AAIDD needs to mirror that diversity.

The AAIDD needs everyone's talents and contributions. Staff members are actively seeking good ideas for webinars, courses, trainings, and books. Professionals working in the field should give serious consideration to submitting a proposal to next year's conference; feedback from conference attendees often provides inspiration to refine, improve, and expand innovative approaches to services and support. And for those who are not yet members, please join the association. Memberships start at \$75 per year, and a robust membership roll is critically important to the association's scope of influence. The new website has made accessing member benefits quite easy. For example, after logging in, members are able to access their journal articles, the online communities of the divisions, and discounts on online courses and bookstore purchases.

### **Race to Catch a Beautiful Future**

It doesn't matter if someone has been in the field of ID/DD for 30 years or for 30 days—each professional who is active in the field today must share responsibility for it. Today is on our watch. It is our turn at bat. Fifty years from now there may be some AAIDD members who are still actively contributing to the field, but for the vast majority of us our time will have passed. What will we have done with our time? What will they say about our era? That, of course, is up to us. How we respond to today's

challenges and to what extent we challenge ourselves will determine our legacy.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams” (Roosevelt, Schlup, & Whisenhunt, 2001, p. 2). I suggest we dream big, believe in one another, and race to catch a beautiful future.

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### Authors:

**James R. Thompson** (e-mail: jrthomp@ilstu.edu), Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-5910.