The Government Relations Committee of SoMIRAC has been actively involved in promoting literacy causes through outreach to both the US Congress and the Maryland General Assembly over the past ten years. Recently, they met with members of Congress and have communicated with them regarding the landmark literacy bill called LEARN Act, Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation. This legislation responds to the clear need for literacy instruction and high quality support for students at all ages (birth to grade 12) to ensure that students have the literacy skills to succeed in school and their future careers. It provides for comprehensive literacy programs as well as professional development opportunities for instructional staff. Finally, this act supports promising and innovative practices to improve literacy and writing, especially for students reading and writing below grade level.

The Committee has also advocated for the rewriting of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the inclusion of assessments that inform instruction. Although this legislation has not been reauthorized in three years, they are hopeful that flexibility with federal funding and multiple methods of assessment will be a part of ESEA.

In the past, the Committee has been successful with advocacy for many bills including the Early Learning Challenge Fund and the Educator Jobs Bill. Their voice has also been strong with the Maryland General Assembly when they meet with delegates and communicate concerns. They are pleased to see the results of the educator effectiveness academies with Race to the Top and are heartened to see the importance of critical thinking in the Common Core Standards and in Maryland counties’ curricular alignments.

Currently, the Government Relations Committee has posted a policy statement of formative assessment that aligns with the Common Core Standards on their website (at www.somirac.org).

Through their work, they are continually striving for the improvement of literacy education and for student self-reflection that leads to lifelong learning.

Dr. Suzanne Clewell is the IRA and SoMIRAC Government Relations Chairperson, and is the former Coordinator of Reading for Montgomery County Public Schools, MD, reader1021@aol.com.
Literacy Educators of Maryland (LEM) is a special interest group of SoMIRAC that acts as a liaison between SoMIRAC and the higher education community of the state. Carolyn Cook from Mount St. Mary’s University chairs this committee of dedicated faculty from various universities across the state.

The value of IRA and SoMIRAC is immeasurable for staying current with literacy policies and practices. Involvement in these organizations is vital for higher educators because they produce research and train future teachers. SoMIRAC becomes the platform for connecting research from higher education with teachers in today's classrooms and for introducing pre-service teachers to quality professional development. LEM is the bridge for this interaction to occur.

LEM's goals are to increase SoMIRAC membership, to involve pre-service teachers in professional development, and to create a teacher education strand at the annual conference. The committee divides the state's higher education institutions among its members and personally sends emails with information about SoMIRAC’s membership and conference. Receiving regular emails from the same person concerning SoMIRAC personalizes the connection. In this way, it is much easier for the professor to make an inquiry about the event or the organization.

With the support of the SoMIRAC president and board, our goals were met last year. At the annual conference committee members and their students or colleagues presented nine concurrent sessions and one feature session which enabled LEM to create a higher education strand. SoMIRAC was awarded the IRA Gold Award for increased student membership. This successful year encouraged the committee members to strive even more to reach out to faculty and students in Maryland higher education institutions.

This year LEM continues with its goals to increase membership and participation in SoMIRAC. The 2012 annual conference is spotlighting Poster Sessions so that university students can share their literacy research with teachers across the state. The committee will invite professors to encourage their students to share their action research. Carolyn Cook looks forward to working with LEM’s committee members: Glynis Barber from Coppin University, Kelly Bull from Notre Dame of Maryland University, Cheryl North-Coleman and Nancy Rankie Shelton from University of Maryland Baltimore Campus, Patricia Dean from Salisbury University, Vicki McQuitty from Towson University, Debra Miller from McDaniel College, and Joyce Wheaton from Frostburg State University as they unite literacy professors across the state of Maryland.

Dr. Carolyn Cook, an assistant professor in the School of Education and Human Services, teaches reading courses to graduate and undergraduate students at Mount St. Mary’s University, cook@msmary.edu.