

Feature Article

Professional Associations in Adult and Continuing Education

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Introduction

What is the current state of professional associations in the field of adult and continuing education? What are their future prospects and potential directions? This type of inquiry into the health of our associations is particularly appropriate at this point in the history of our profession. As a result of facing critical issues of governance and finance, the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) is being transformed; how and to what extent remains unclear at these preliminary stages. State and regional associations grapple with similar concerns, some having successfully re-vitalized themselves in recent years, others just now facing challenges of survival. Are these “ups and downs” all merely part of a natural “life cycle” of associations? Or are they part of a process complete with the uninhibited exuberance of youth, the conflicts of adolescence, and the growth and development of adulthood in

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response to internal and external challenges and change? As our profession ages, will our associations develop the wisdom to make responsible and compassionate decisions consistently based on expertise and experience?

This article is a synthesis of the comments of leaders from nine adult and continuing education (ACE) state and regional associations across the country. The perceptions of these individuals, most of whom have long histories of involvement in professional associations, reflect the nature and characteristics of a recurring life cycle as proposed above. To provide a context for their current insights, brief commentaries on terminology and national historic context follow.

Associations Defined

I prefer the term association rather than organization as I prefer to emphasize the benefits of individuals coming together as colleagues rather than the structures of the relationships they create. Both are equally essential to acknowledge, however. It's not even a matter of degree, merely of focus, of what's in the foreground of the discussion. Houle (1996) distinguishes between associations and organizations on several counts. In associations, for example, he sees authority as temporary, flowing through officers elected by association membership, with the primary focus on serving the needs of that membership. In organizations, however, relatively permanent, hierarchical structures tend to be the norm, and the focus is on benefiting organizational owners or those outside their organization.

Brockett (1989) notes the breadth of scope of professional associations that ranges from local to international connections. For purposes of this discussion, the focus has been limited to state and regional associations that exist primarily for providing membership services and in which memberships provide the operational budget. This matches the first of three types of ACE associations identified by Smith, Eyre, and Miller (1982): individual-membership-based associations, such as those included here; institution-based associations, such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC); and associations of associations, such as the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE). Additional specificity of the associations included in this article is provided later under association profiles.

History of National Adult and Continuing Education Associations

The historical patterns of ACE associations mirror persistent conversations around unity and diversity that, for better or worse, have come to be identified with the field. At the national level, for example, since 1926 groups of adult educators have come together, then separated, only to come together again. They have joined in celebration of their commonalities and unity and have divided in recognition of their differences and diversity. This 70-year pattern is being played out once again as the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) faces challenges from its membership, challenges that will lead to its eventual fragmentation or to its collaborative rebuilding and revitalization. AAACE is only one of approximately 50 national associations, however, that exist within the broad field related to the provision of educational opportunities for adults; most of these have been increasing in membership, budgets, services, and professional contributions. Further, several new associations are created every few years (Knox, 1999). Regardless of the struggle, it seems professionals still seek to come together, although perhaps the diversity within each of these unions is narrowing in scope.

When the Carnegie Corporation assisted in the formation of the American Association of Adult Education (AAAE) in 1926, the Department of Adult Education (originally the Department of Immigration Education) within the National Education Association already had been established five years earlier. Differences in the character and purpose of these two associations, however, became more and more apparent through the years, eventually leading in the 1940s to the creation of the Joint Commission for the Study of Adult Education. Ultimately, in 1951, these organizations came together to found the Adult Education Association of the United States (AEA/USA). Almost immediately, however, the National Association of Public School Adult Educators (NAPSAE) was created in 1952 as a semi-autonomous association within AEA/USA. NAPSAE later became NAPCAE, the National Association for Public Continuing Adult Education, and, in 1982, AEA/USA and NAPCAE merged to form the present AAACE (Knowles, 1977/1994; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). These associations have not been large, with membership of AEA and AAACE, since 1958, hovering between 3,000 and 3,500 (Stubblefield & Keane, p. 296). Interestingly, at the recent AAACE conference several discussions focused on

whether the size of the association really mattered. This question cannot be divorced from conversations focused on how to honor both the common bonds of the profession as well as the specialized needs of its professionals.

State and Regional Associations

The challenges faced by state and regional associations are no different from those faced by national groups, but their struggles are less visible outside their respective geographic regions. Their numbers, however, are impressive. With perhaps an estimated handful of exceptions, each state has a statewide association for adult, continuing, and/or community education. The way in which these groups come together continues to differ and change and, again, indicates the sometimes tenuous nature of our affiliations. Most commonly seen is the combination of adult and continuing education, although, in some states, community education has been added to the mix. There are only two regional associations that are recognized historically : the seven-state Missouri Valley Adult Education Association (MVAEA) and the eight-state Mountain Plains Adult Education Association (MPAEA). In this article, in addition to these two regional associations, seven states are represented: Arizona, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Although an informal study, limited in scope, the interview responses of these nine association leaders provide insight into the current state and future directions of professional associations in adult and continuing education.

Association Profiles

State and regional associations date back to the early years of adult education in this country. For example, the Ohio Association for Adult and Continuing Education was founded in 1932, Missouri Valley in 1938, and Mountain Plains in 1942. Virginia will celebrate 50 years in 2000. The remaining five associations were founded in the 1960s and 1970s.

Associations vary widely in size, affected by factors such as state population; federal, state, and local support of adult education; other professional ACE associations within the state; and the current leadership and vitality of the association. Ohio (1,000 members), Pennsylvania (900 to 950 members) and Texas (1,000) are the largest of the associations reviewed here. When Texas adds its student memberships (available for

\$1), its total exceeds 4,000. New Jersey's membership, almost double what it was four years ago, currently sits at 300. Arizona estimates that it has 275 members; Virginia, 250 members; and Wisconsin, 150. Missouri Valley and Mountain Plains estimate memberships of approximately 176 and 500 respectively. Most states say their membership has been fairly stable in recent years; only one has experienced a dramatic decline. The revitalization of the New Jersey association is perhaps the most inspirational story from this group. From the verge of bankruptcy with a declining membership of 150 members four years ago, it is now an association operating in the black with a membership that has doubled in size.

Without question the vast majority of association members work in adult basic education, workforce and family literacy, ESL, GED, and adult high schools; the scope of their efforts reflect the needs and interests of this practitioner population. There seems to be a growing number of correctional educators joining adult education associations. Other members, with some programmatic overlap, come from community and technical colleges, community-based programs, community education, vocationally oriented programs, four-year higher education institutions, and university continuing education. The bottom line, however, is that these associations represent a relatively homogeneous membership base.

Associations usually use their money for general operating costs, membership services such as conferences and publications, and, in the case of several states, student scholarships. Students use this money, ranging from \$300-\$1000 in these associations, to continue their education beyond the GED or high school. Beginning in the 1990s associations have also begun to invest their funds. Of the nine associations represented here, six either had invested, or are currently exploring investing, in certificates of deposit, mutual funds and money market accounts. Three of these six had investigated, or are investigating, two or more of these options.

The governance and management of associations varies, but the key aspect to be noted here is that elected volunteers continue to form the core of association leadership. As Shelton and Spikes (1991) assert, "Most, if not all, association activities typically operate on a volunteer basis" (p. 73). Some associations, however, are exploring alternatives. For example, one association pays an hourly rate to its membership secretary, one pays its newsletter editor, and one has an executive director who receives an annual stipend. Several mentioned that they are exploring the option of paid leadership as a result of career demands that pre-

vent current and potential association leaders from giving the amount of time and energy that they know is required and that they want to give.

When asked about the value, meaning, and relevance of their associations, leaders logically responded with association functions, with what their associations do. The challenges inherent in each of these activities drive association leaders to question how they could do what they do better—or differently. These questions, in turn, indicate the trends and current directions of exploration for associations. A review of basic association functions with their inherent challenges is provided next, followed by a synthesis of the questions and the potential directions that they indicate for state and regional professional ACE associations.

Association Functions and Challenges

Associations currently seem to have at least three primary functions: to serve as advocates of the field and as vehicles of information for their members, legislators, and the public at large; to provide professional development for current and new adult educators; and to connect individuals and, perhaps, other associations with one another. Again, the membership of these associations work mostly in adult basic and secondary education for adults; thus it is their needs and concerns that are reflected here.

Advocacy. Advocacy is at the forefront of the discussion around both association activity and association challenges. Associations seem to see one of their main responsibilities as responding to outside threats to the basic education and literacy field at large. For example, New Jersey seeks to play a “key role in the monitoring and influencing of the interpretation of legislation at the state level.” Clearly, this role of “legislative watchdog” is paramount. In addition, the battles of their individual members are their battles to fight collectively. Associations serve as “a collective voice at the state level for the individual voices at the local level.” Associations realize their collective voice lends strength to their communications with legislators and the public as they strive to inform them of the value of adult education in this country, about who their students are, and why they are important. Several states, most notably Texas, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, referred to the value of their relationship with their state departments of adult education in enhancing their ability to serve as advocates and vehicles of information. Associations feel keenly the need to keep their membership informed on legislative activities by sharing and explaining key issues and concerns.

In addition to the incredible challenges of keeping current on legislation; of communicating with their members, the legislature, and the public; and of encouraging all of these individuals to act, several association leaders are now struck by a new concern. How do they keep the energy going after the crisis is over? Several of these nine associations have fought successfully tense legislative and funding battles and, as a result of the rallying of the membership, have found renewed vigor and hope for their associations. The challenge now, however, is how to keep that same level of commitment, energy, and momentum alive or, for example in New Jersey, how to translate “hot grassroots activity into meaningful structures.”

Professional development. The provision of professional development, usually in the form of conferences, local activities, and publications, was the second most talked about function of associations. These efforts are perhaps the most consistently visible activity of associations and, as such, are often cited as a major source of meaning and value of association membership. A possibly unique undertaking is the two-day Leadership Academy offered by the Missouri Valley association. Another possibly unique, or at least rare, interest for an adult education association is the investigation by the Mountain Plains association in offering CEUs as a means of helping individuals just coming into the field. An interest in credentialing was also mentioned by several states.

Challenges of providing professional development seemed to focus frequently on how to ensure equitable access to conferences and leadership opportunities. Cited equally as frequently was the recognition of the need to incorporate theoretical bases and sound, academic grounding to ensure richer, quality professional development opportunities.

Making connections. Recently the Mountain Plains Association posed the question to its membership, “If we didn’t exist, what would we be missing?” Responses included a “sense of professional community” and “sense of family.” This need for connection is a third association function—or perhaps a dimension of all association activity. It is a frequent response to the question of what meaning and value associations hold for their members. Associations become communities of adult educators in which people doing the same thing are joined and in which individuals can express and share their ideas, common concerns, and issues. Arizona sees their association as providing “non-judgmental places for the free exchange of ideas and opinions.” Ohio notes that associations can serve as a “connecting point” for their members. This role is a particularly

valuable asset in adult education, a field in which adult educators are often not connected to their parent organization or may not be connected to the “mainstream” of adult education. Virginia supports the importance of letting people know there is indeed a statewide group that represents a profession of adult and literacy education providers.

A slightly different perspective on connections is the ability of associations to connect their members to the whole of which they are a part. That is, associations can expose their membership to the literature, theorists, and knowledge base of adult and continuing education; to the broad scope of adult and continuing education; and to the perspectives and experiences of fellow practitioners beyond their local settings.

Connections are valued not only among individuals, however. Associations are also seen as benefiting from forming connections with other associations, as suggested for example, in Wisconsin and Ohio. Again, the conversation reflects the dilemma of how associations can offer both the common themes of the profession while simultaneously meeting the diverse needs of their membership. Other, more logistical challenges reflect those noted elsewhere: Simply, how can associations reach their entire membership to help them connect?

Questions and Directions

Imbedded in the questions associations are asking are the directions in which they are most likely to be headed in the near future. Common concerns and questions may be shared, yet each state and region will respond differently according to its particular context and membership. Not unlike AAACE, and not without historical precedent, state and regional associations are also, and again, examining their scope and structure, the composition of their membership, their options for effective communication, and their choices for responsible and effective management.

Scope and structure. Can ACE associations continue to exist as broad-based, umbrella organizations? Can large conferences continue to be viable as more and more adult educators attend only discipline-specific conferences due to shrinking support and lack of time? Are options of partnering with other associations while retaining a specialized focus viable, or are coalitions that serve specialized interests while attempting to preserve common bonds preferable? Pennsylvania and New Jersey addressed the issue of scope both realistically and philosophically; each is concerned with retaining a balance of focus within their associations between the current demands of workforce education and the “general busi-

ness of adult education.” Determining viable association structures is dependent on the responses to these questions.

Membership. Several questions closely related to size and scope center specifically on membership. For example, should associations seek to broaden their membership to reflect more accurately the scope of lifelong learning? And as Pennsylvania asks, “How big do we need to get?” Ensuring broader representation in leadership positions and increasing involvement of the membership, including students, are other outstanding concerns.

In addition to asking about membership size and composition, conversations also center on the “graying of the membership.” How do associations bring new people into the association, particularly into leadership positions, as older members retire after long years of service? How do these older members help new members come to know the value of the association? How do they demonstrate its importance? These questions have the potential to spin off creative and exciting responses for building associations as the potential exists to draw and benefit from the perspectives of both emerging and experienced leaders.

Communication. No association activity or challenge can be addressed successfully without attending to issues of communication. Communication systems must be means of providing information and services to members; of hearing and collecting members’ needs, concerns, and suggestions; and of both bringing individuals together and dispersing them to external sources of support. In addition, particularly in their role as advocates, associations need communication systems that facilitate timely, responsive, and efficient connections with players both internal and external to the association. Finally, for professional development purposes, associations ask if there is a way, a “virtual” way, to reach those members who are unable to attend conferences. Are these individuals any more likely to have access to the web than to funds to attend a conference? How do associations develop involvement on listserves and websites, especially in light of the fact that not everyone has access? In essence, how do associations consistently ensure communication for and among their entire membership?

Management. Currently there seems to be one overriding management question. How do associations continue to survive on volunteer leadership when those willing to volunteer are realistically unable to do so because of the demands of careers and daily living? Leaders are quick to talk about the extreme difficulty of maintaining a full-time job (or

perhaps two or three part-time jobs as is often the case in adult education) and finding the time and energy they would like to commit to their association work. Is paid leadership or management a possibility? What are the philosophical and practical consequences of such a decision? Can new volunteer leaders, who are no less busy than current leadership, be recruited?

How associations can best be responsive to their membership is the second major concern expressed. How do associations continue to stay in touch with and meet the needs of their memberships? A true commitment to this pervasive responsibility is consistently clear.

In addition to these two major concerns, other questions loom. Should—can—associations have a central office location? How can associations provide continuity and stability with leadership that changes every one or two years? What are the most effective membership databases? How can affordable insurance benefits best be offered? How are funds generated and managed to best benefit the membership? These are the survival needs faced by associations that demand attention no less urgently than the interrelated philosophical questions prompted by questions of scope and meaning.

Conclusions

As reflected in this article, associations of adult and continuing education are collective voices for the field. Professional associations are also, by definition, vehicles of professionalization, and associations connect individuals to one another and to their profession. Amidst fulfilling these fundamental purposes, associations simultaneously face challenges posed by questions of scope and size, by the need to equitably and efficiently serve and communicate with their membership, and by their responsibility to manage themselves effectively and ethically.

Above all, however, professional associations are still civil spaces in which adult educators come together to support one another; to shape their philosophies and practice; and to work to ensure a local, national, and even international presence for adult education. Wherever associations are in their revolving life cycle, the commitment to serve and represent adult learners, adult educators, and the field of adult and continuing education remains clear, firm, and strong.

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