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# Perspectives in Adult Education—The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE): Its history, purpose, and activities

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The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) is an international association of adult educators. Although members practice in a variety of different fields in many countries around the world, they share the common belief that lifelong learning contributes to human fulfillment and positive social change. They envision a more humane world made possible by the diverse practice of our members in helping adults acquire the knowledge, skills and values needed to lead productive and satisfying lives.

The mission of AAACE is to “provide leadership for the field of adult and continuing education by expanding opportunities for adult growth and development; unifying adult educators; fostering the development and dissemination of theory, research, information, and best practices; promoting identity and standards for the profession; and advocating relevant public policy and social change initiatives” (AAACE, 2012). AAACE is a strong advocate for relevant public policy, legislation, and social change initiatives which expand the depth and breadth of opportunities for the education of adults. AAACE also supports the ongoing growth and expansion of leadership roles in the field. In addition to this general support, AAACE does advocate for specific policies, programs, legislation, and initiatives of critical importance to lifelong learning. The organization’s advocacy statement is as follows:

The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan organization as described in Section 501(c)(3). AAACE is an association of academics and professionals in the field of lifelong learning. As stated in our mission, the association is dedicated to the belief that our field should enhance human fulfillment and positive social change. We therefore strongly advocate relevant public policy, legislation, and social change initiatives which expand the depth and breadth of opportunities for the education of adults. We also support the ongoing growth and expansion of leadership roles in the field (AAACE, 2012).

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## **The History of AAACE**

The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education was founded in 1982. It was the result of a merger between two existing associations; the National Association for Public and Continuing Adult Education (NAPCAE) and the Adult Education Association of the United States of America (AEA). NAPCAE and AEA had worked on similar initiatives throughout their respective histories, and between 1949 and 1952, they were a single organization (during that time period, NAPCAE was known as the National Association for Public School Adult Educators, or NAPSAE) (Rose, 2008). In 1982, at a conference in San Antonio, the two organizations joined forces to become AAACE.

Although AAACE was founded in 1982, the history of adult education associations in the United States dates back to the 1920s. In 1925 and 1926, the Carnegie Corporation sponsored a series of regional conferences focused on adult education. At each of these conferences, the formation of a national adult education association was considered. As a result of these regional conferences, the American Association for Adult Education (AAACE) was formed in 1926 (Henschke, 2007). Funding for that national association came from the Carnegie Corporation, and the initial organizational meeting was held in Chicago (Henschke, 2007). The original mission of AAACE was “to advance a particular vision of adult education, one that was community-based not school-based and that was also non-vocational and non-utilitarian” (Rose, 2008, p. 34).

The organization originally known as AAACE went through several mergers and name changes through the mid and later 1900s. At the time of the 1982 merger, NAPSAE was an organization focused on adult basic education, and AEA was “a broad umbrella group of adult educators” (Rose, 2008, p. 34). The merger lasted for almost 20 years, until 2000, when the AAACE Commission for Adult Basic Education (COABE) left AAACE to become its own organization. “When the two groups split, COABE continued separately and AAACE was left to reconsider its central purpose. With a much reduced membership, the principal issue was survival” (p. 34). AAACE did survive, and today it is a thriving organization of over 1100 members. The main office of AAACE is located in Bowie, MD.

## **AAACE Structure**

The organization is governed by a board of directors, which consists of a five-member executive committee, two board members-at-large, and seven commission directors. All board members are volunteers and are elected by AAACE membership. The organization’s bylaws dictate how it is structured and how it may operate.

The field of adult education is very broad, and the structure of AAACE reflects the broad nature of the field. There are two types of subgroups that are found in AAACE. They are commissions and special interest groups (SIGs). Commissions are formal subgroups that are led by a director. There are seven different commissions within AAACE, and members may join up to two commissions. Commissions, along with the mission of each, are noted below. They are as follows:

- **Adult Basic Education and Literacy (CABEL).** The mission of the Commission for Adult Basic Education and Literacy is to facilitate the research, discussion and implementation of policies, and to provide the development of professionals in the areas of adult basic education and literacy.
- **Affiliated Organizations (CAO).** The CAO coordinates relationships with state or regional adult and continuing education associations and other organizations that are affiliate members with AAACE.

- Community, Minority, and Non-formal Education (CCMNFE). CCMNFE is dedicated to the belief that minority and non-formal life-long learners contribute to professional development and human fulfillment within communities as promoter of productive social change, and advocates of relevant public policy and programs.
- International Adult Education (CIAE). CIAE provides a forum for the discussion of international issues related to adult education in general, as well as adult education in various countries around the globe.
- Professors of Adult Education (CPAE). The mission of CPAE is to:
  - Act as a vehicle for strengthening and supporting excellence in academic programs in adult education.
  - Identify and disseminate resources that support adult education as a field of study, research, and practice.
  - Provide opportunities for the professional development of professors of adult education.
  - Study and disseminate positions on social issues of concern to adult education.
  - Provide a forum for critical reflection and dialogue on scholarship and practice that reflects the diversity in adult education.
  - Provide a caring, supportive and collegial community for professors of adult education.
- Program Management (CPM). CPM provides information and developmental training for adult and continuing education program managers.
- Workforce and Professional Development (CWPD). CWPD strives to increase competencies, knowledge, career opportunities, and development in workforce and continuing professional education. They achieve these goals through supporting professionals, educators, and educational institutions whose outreach efforts meet the needs of adult learners in organizational settings.

In addition to commissions noted above, AAACE has 28 special interest groups (SIGs) that represent specific areas of interest and involvement to adult educators. While commissions are more formal, and their structure, purpose and overall nature is governed by AAACE by-laws, SIGs can be formed by any member, provided there is a high enough level of interest. Special interest groups include the following: staff development, cooperative extensions, distance learning, graduate students, religious education, community colleges, and vocational and career education (among others). Two new SIGs were started in 2011: A Labor/Workforce Education Sig and a Sustainability and Environmental Education SIG. A SIG dedicated to education related to service members, veterans, and military spouses was started in 2012.

## **Membership and Services**

AAACE publishes three journals: *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ), *Adult Learning* (AL) and the *Journal of Transformative Education* (JTED). Each journal has a different focus and mission. AEQ is a scholarly-reviewed journal designed to “stimulate a problem-oriented, critical approach to research and practice, with an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary and international perspectives” (AEQ, 2013).

*Adult Learning* is a practitioner-focused journal. Its purpose is described as follows:

(*Adult Learning*) is designed for adult educators to provide articles that approach practice issues with a problem-solving emphasis. The audience for *Adult Learning* includes all individuals who design, manage, teach, conduct, and evaluate programs of adult and continuing education (AL, 2013).

The *Journal of Transformative Education* (JTED) is “a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal focused on advancing the understanding, practice, and experience of transformative education” (JTED, 2013).

In addition to these three journals, AAACE publishes the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. The Handbook is a text that includes contributions by leading scholars in the field of adult education. Issues covered include adult education theory, practice, beliefs, evolving issues, processes and functions. The Handbook is published every ten years.

The AAACE Annual Conference is a yearly event that attracts members and guests from around the globe. Conference attendees have the opportunity to attend a variety of concurrent sessions, symposia, roundtable discussions, poster sessions, and pre- and post-conference meetings. Opportunities for learning and growth are combined with networking and fellowship activities designed to promote the field, encourage collaboration and relationship building, and stimulate discussion. This year, the AAACE annual conference was held in Lexington, Kentucky on November 5-8, 2013. The 2014 conference will be held in Charleston, South Carolina.

Membership in AAACE (depending on membership level) includes discounted annual conference rates, commission and SIG memberships, journal subscriptions, and a variety of other benefits.

## **The Future of AAACE**

AAACE is a growing organization, and the AAACE Board of Directors is working to continuously improve the overall membership experience. A strategic plan for the future was approved by the Board of Directors in 2011. That plan was revised and augmented in 2012. Key to the future success of the organization are issues of member services, conference planning, member communication planning, internal processes and procedures, board member development and fiscal responsibility and planning (AAACE, 2012).

Important to the future of AAACE is the development and maintenance of strategic partnerships with organizations of a complimentary nature. Collaboration with state organizations in areas in which the AAACE annual conference is held, for example, have been beneficial to the state organization and to AAACE. AAACE has partnered with several organizations on the development of pre and co-conferences in association with the AAACE national conference. The synergies resulting from these collaborations have strengthened all organizations involved.

“Often we spend so much time “doing” adult education that we forget to promote our achievements and successes” (Schmidt, 2013, p. 80). Communication is important to AAACE and to the field, in general. A comprehensive communications plan, including the use of various forms of social media, was developed and implemented as a result of the 2011 strategic plan. Communication is more consistent and members receive communication in a wider variety of forms. Ongoing communication between AAACE and its members helps to cement the member relationship and keeps members informed of the latest developments at AAACE.

A focus on internal procedures has resulted in more efficiency and the development and/or revision of policies and processes that will take the organization forward. Proactive work on things like future year conference planning

helps the organization to be more efficient. Training and development for AAACE staff and board members has helped to continuously strengthen leadership.

All aspects of the future of AAACE depend on strong financial management. Sound management of the association's finances and the prudent use of resources are key for the long-term viability of the organization. Managing revenues, keeping expenses low, and allocating funds for various initiatives are all monitored very closely by board members. Moving toward the future, firm financial footing will allow the organization to grow and thrive.

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